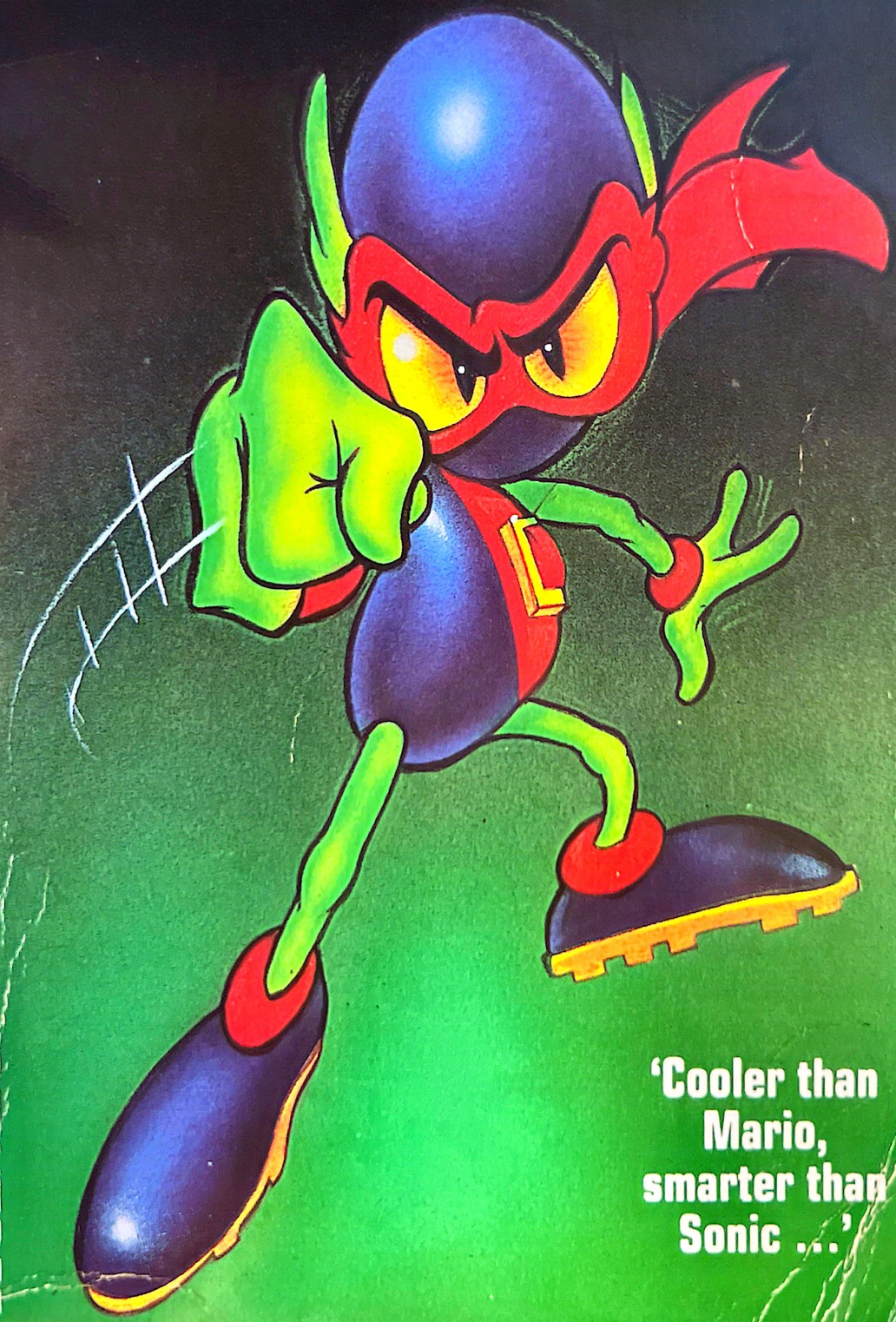
ZOOL™

ZOOL RULES



'Cooler than Mario, smarter than Sonic ...'

BOXTREE

ZOOL RULES

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BOXTREE

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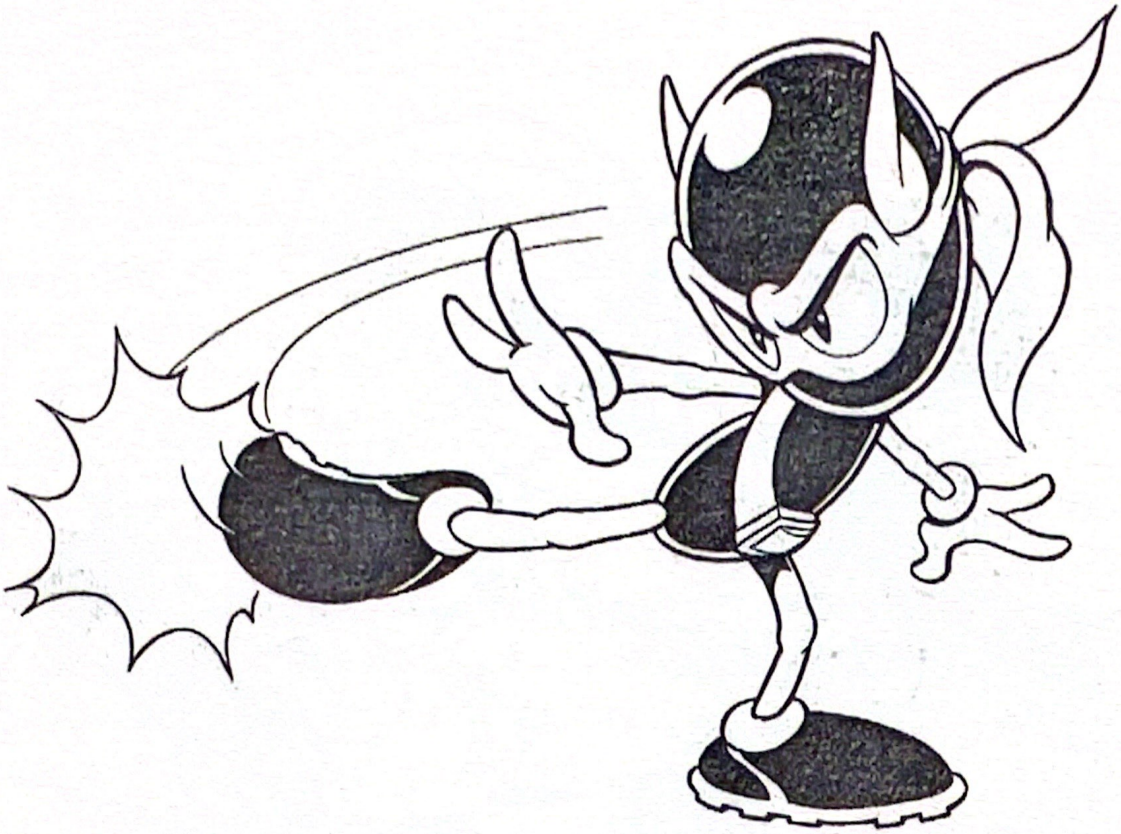


INTRO

Now listen up people and pay attention because this is pretty important stuff and it might just save your life one day...

What do you mean: who am I? I'm this rectangular papery thing you're holding in your hand/claw/paw/tenticle, depending on your species and cellular orientation.

Long before CDs, television and even computer games, (yeah, we're talking ancient history here) people used to use an almost superhuman ability that some people today have seemed to forgotten how to use. With it they visited the darkest parts of their world and the outer limits of the galaxy. You can rediscover this ability if you give it a try.

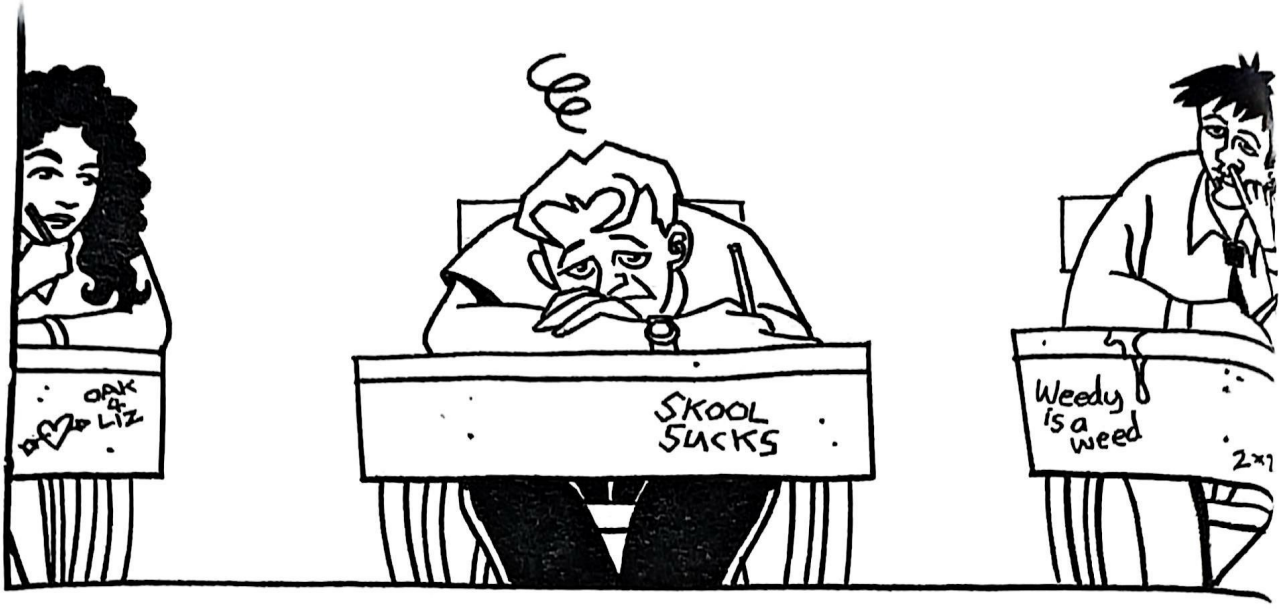
It starts at the front of your face and ends up... well, just about anywhere you want it to. Twenty thousand leagues under the sea, on a journey to the centre of the earth, a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away – it's up to you...and your imagination.

It's because of your imagination that you can hear me talking inside your head without me having any lips, lungs or vocal chords. Weird huh? Well, hold onto your trainers because where we're going, weird is just another word with 'w' in it. For the places you're going to and things you're about to see, you'll have to invent a whole new dictionary of words like 'awesomrageous' and 'fantabulous' or even '?!!?'. It's really amazing stuff when you give it a try.

Okay, enough yapping, let's get to it. Are you all sitting comfortably? Good, then I'll begin.

Think of something really, really, really huge, double it, add a million more, then times it by a squintillion for fun and you're not even remotely close to how big the universe is. Look out of a window one night up at the stars and you'll see a bit of it but only a very small bit. It's your own universal back garden, complete with grumpy neighbours and a dog that barks all the time.

However, the universe is also really, really small as well. It's in the cupboard under the stairs, it's between your toes and it's up your dad's nose; in fact it's everywhere. We're all part of it, living bits of a 'ginourmous' (see, a new word already!) jigsaw puzzle but only someone's lost the box lid picture and we don't know what the whole thing looks like anymore. All we know is that the universe is so big (and small) that it goes on forever, like the last lesson in school on the



Friday afternoon before the summer holidays. This going on forever bit is called *infinity* and that's where we're going next.

Have you ever looked at your reflection in a mirror and thought that the you on the other side of the glass was not really you at all but someone who only looked like you? That if you turned your back on it, instead of turning around as well it would blow a raspberry at you, but when you turned around again it would still look like a perfectly normal reflection, maybe with a smirk on its face?

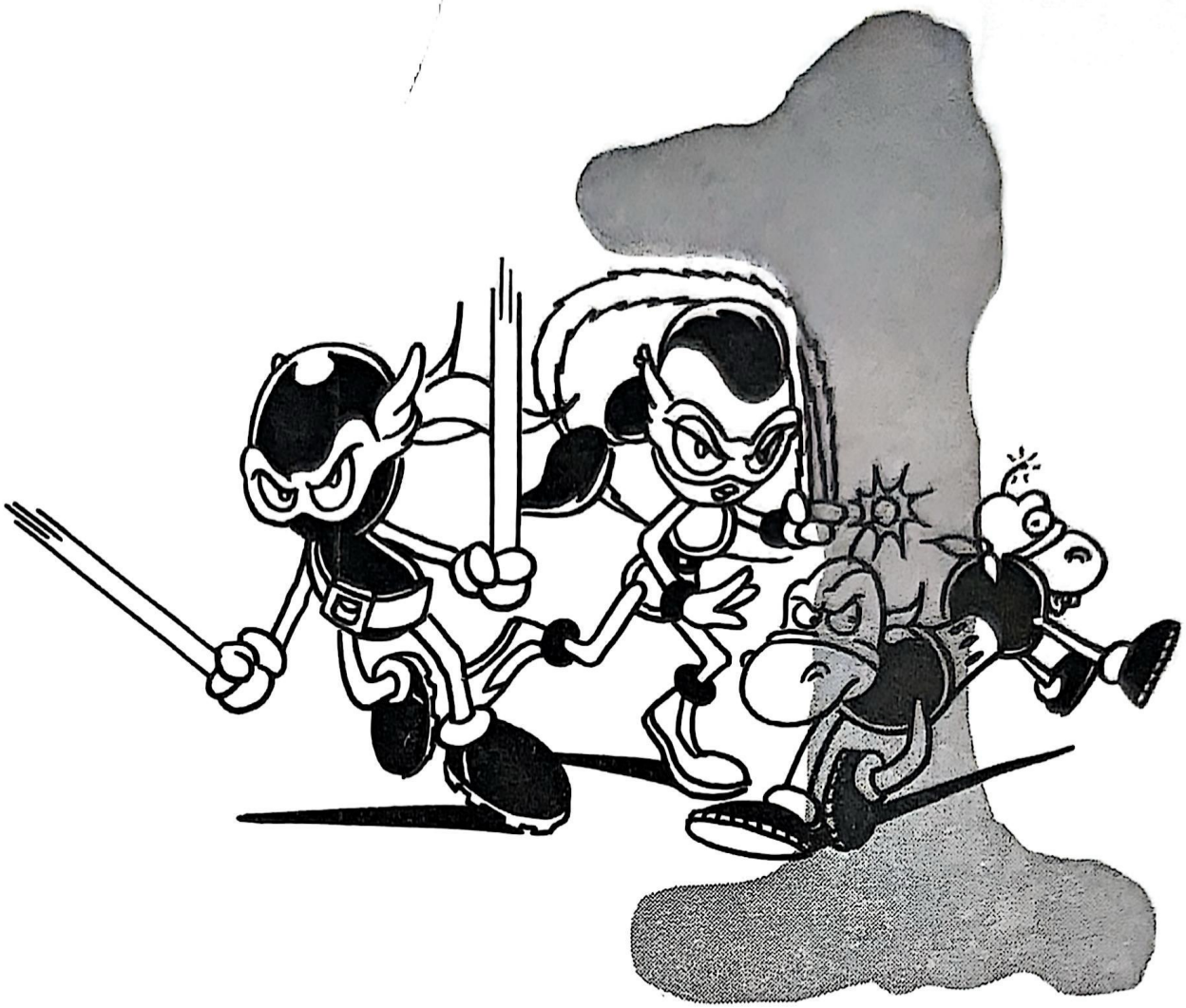
Well, try putting a mirror behind you as well as in front and you'll see dozens and dozens of reflections of yourself going on and on and on and on...

This is infinity, a limitless number of yous looking in mirrors at each other on a limitless number of planet Earths and on each one you're different. On one Earth the difference may only be something tiny like going 'Umm?' instead of 'Err?' when doing your maths homework but on another you could be **leading a fleet of Hawking starfighters** to save the planet from an invading armada of Jelloids from the K'Ping Empire! Either way, it's infinity in your face.

So in an infinite universe there are an infinite number of possibilities, an infinite number of ways

things can turn out. Somewhere, out there, in the inky murkiness of space the story you're about to read is actually happening, while on other worlds it has just happened and on more worlds still it has yet to happen. That makes everything you're about to read the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Hey! Would I lie to *you*?



War and Peas

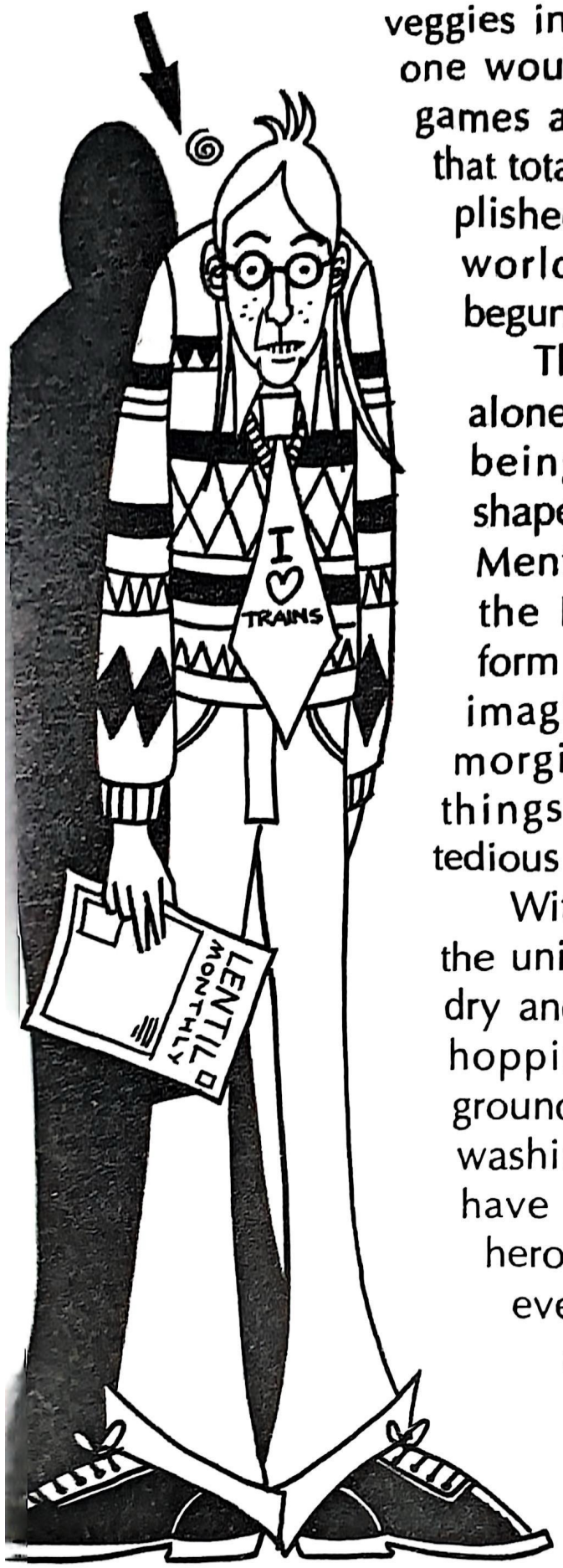
There's a war going on, everywhere, all around you, every day. Usually wars are caused by people deciding it's better to hit someone than to talk to them but this war is different. You won't read about it in the newspapers or see it on the TV news but it's happening all right and if you know what to look for you'll see the shrapnel.

Have you ever put your favourite comic down only to find a few minutes later it's not where you

left it? Or have you been ready to smeg the end of level bad guy on your games console when the system crashes and your high score goes down the toilet? Call it bad luck, call it fate but the more you think about it, the more you realise it's happening all the time and not just by accident either. What's causing these bad vibes are mystical shock waves from a war in a place called the **Nth Dimension**.

The main villain behind all of this is a character called Krool. He, or rather it, is an immeasurably powerful and malevolent force on the edge of existence that has watched with envy and waited with impatience from before the beginning of time, probing and testing the walls that keep it on the outside of the universe, trying to force its way in, just for an opportunity to spoil your day. He intends to do this by creating a thing called entropy. This will turn everything in the universe back into the energy that it's made from. Krool will then take that energy and fill his face with it all until he's fit to burst. But don't expect a huge invading army to come storming through from the **Nth Dimension**, Krool's far too sneaky and sly for that. He's slowly worming his way into our universe by taking away all of the fun. If you don't have fun, then you don't really feel like doing much and if you don't feel like doing much then entropy sets in and that's just what Krool wants; his mouth's watering at the thought.

If Krool had his way, we'd all be wearing sensible shoes instead of trainers, eating green



veggies instead of burgers and no one would be playing computer games at all! But Krool realises that total entropy must be accomplished in stages, and on your world the attacks have just begun.

The problem is Krool's not alone in his evil mission; he's being aided by a sinister shapechanging cube known as Mental Block. Not only can the Blockster alter his own form but he can twist people's imaginations as well, transmorgifying the fab and fun things in life into dull and tedious stuff.

With an evil being older than the universe waiting to suck you dry and a maniac shapechanger hopping around in the background looking like a demented washing machine, things might have looked a bit grim, but a hero came forward to fight for everyone's right to have fun and excitement. He's a brave warrior, a party hardy guy, a dude

with mood, a pan-dimensional ninja warlock with a snappy dress sense and his name on the soles of his shoes. He is the one, the only, the fantabulously cosmic... **Zool!**

Zool isn't alone either. He's bought some buddies along to help him kick Krool's butt. There's Zooz, the pony-tailed princess of power who's breathtakingly beautiful, devastatingly smart and who can shoot the eyebrows off a Vegalian bean fly at 1000 metres.

And then there's Zoon. A dog with a split personality because he's got two heads, one at either end of his body. One end's brainy and smart, the other isn't but that doesn't stop him from being loyal and brave as he helps his friends save the universe from Krool and his hordes of terminal party poopers.

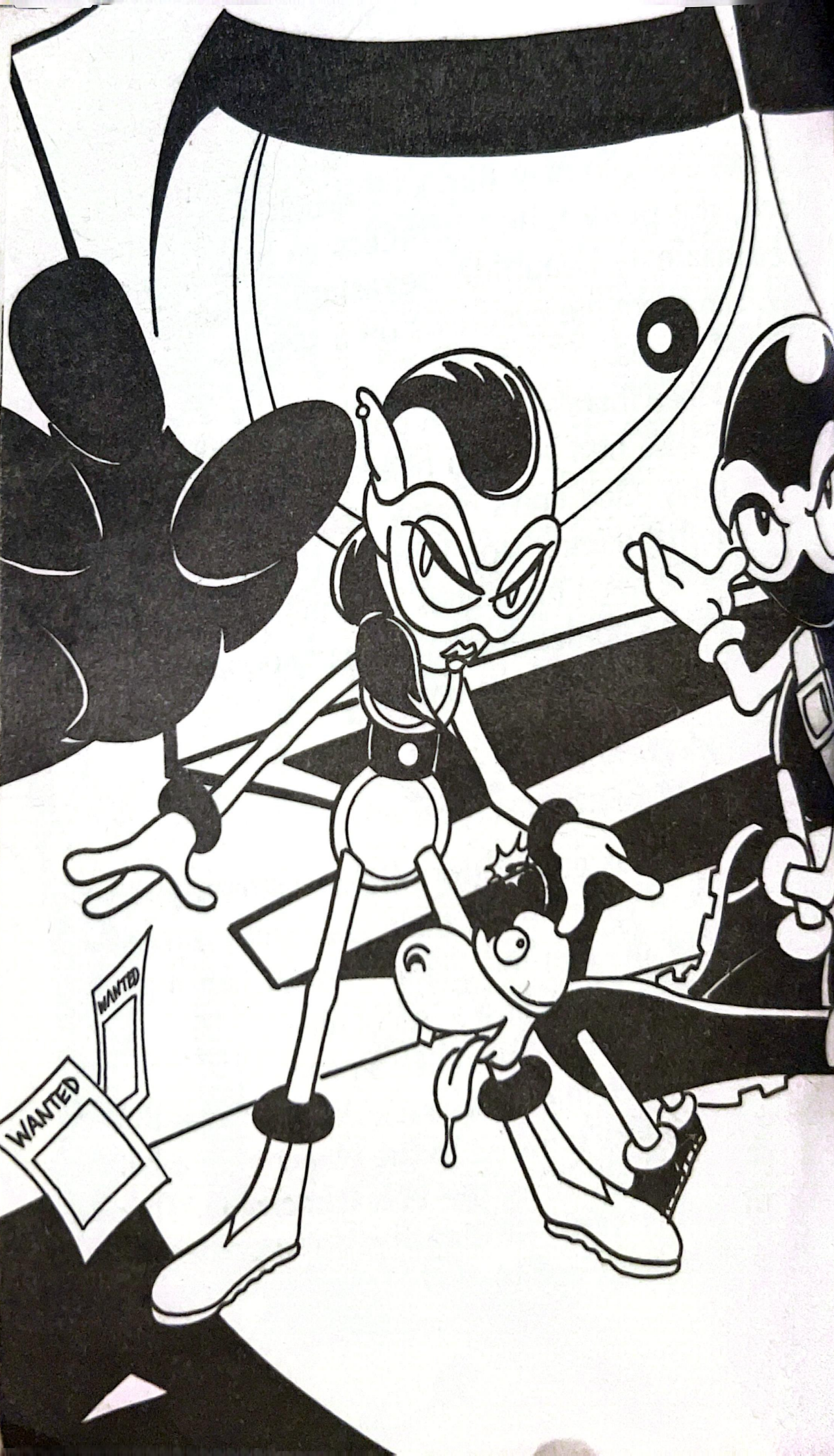
And so the adventure begins...

* * *

The world was green, the brightest green you've ever seen in your life. As their spaceship came into land, Zooz thought the planet looked like a giant emerald glittering against a sea of night.

Zoon thought it looked like a pea.

They'd been hoping to track down Mental Block whose ship they'd traced to the planet after a battle in the Music sector of the **Nth Dimension**. They'd evaded his trap of deadly, energy-draining Wagnerian rings and blasted his ship with a flurry of

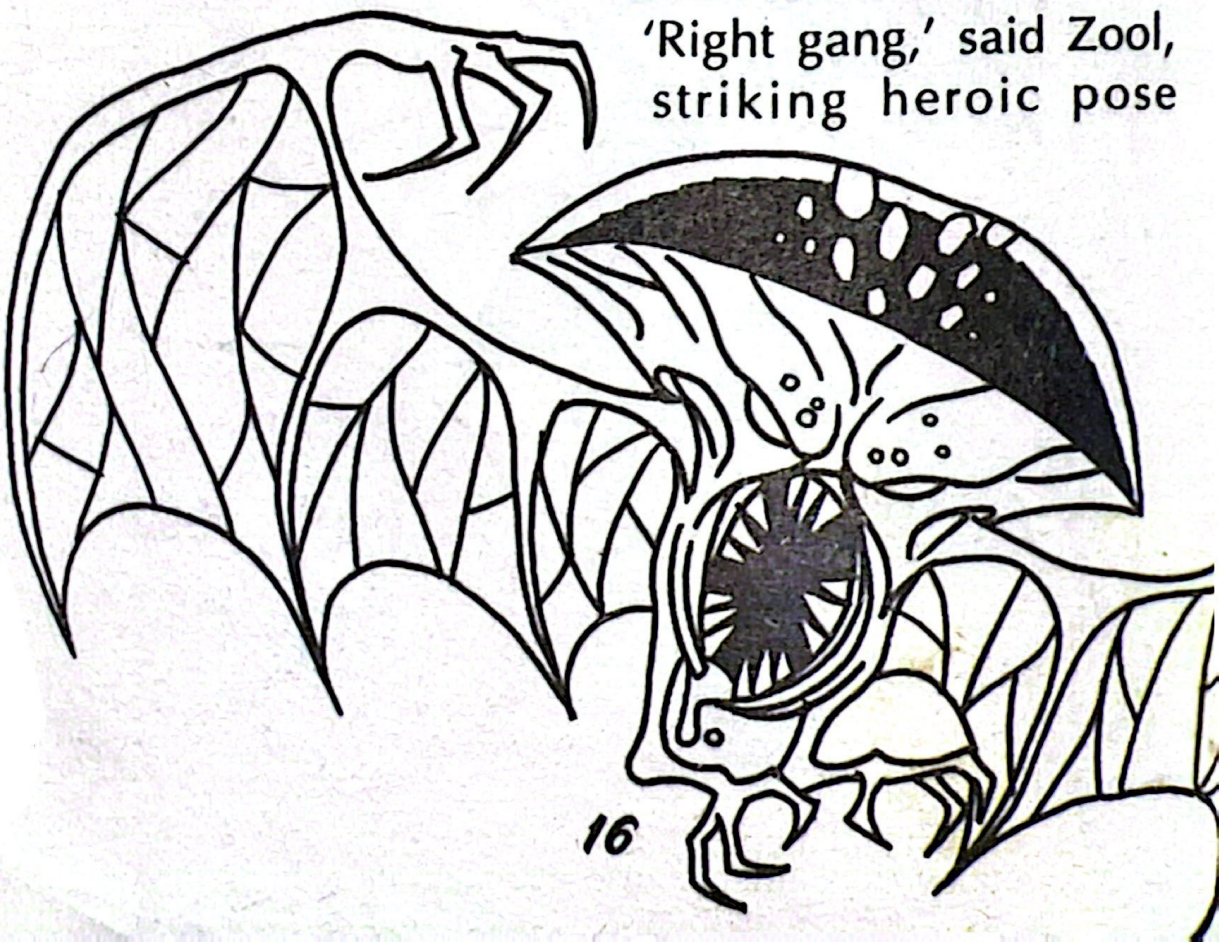

WANTED
WANTED

WANTED
WANTED
Hey, cut that out

Motorhead missiles but he'd still escaped them. Now he was holed up on this world somewhere, repairing his ship, and all they had to do was find him.

When they landed the ship, the ***PURE THOUGHT***, they soon discovered why the planet looked so green from space: it was alive, writhing and boiling with lifeforms. Millions upon millions upon millions of creatures and plants all creeping, crawling, sliming, squelching, gambolling, swinging, hopping and pouncing their way across the surface of the planet. They ate anything and everything, usually each other. Zool and his brave band soon discovered this, once they had disembarked and started their search for Mental Block. Almost the first thing that happened when the heroes set foot on the ground was that Zooz had to stop what can only be described as a flying mushroom with bat wings and a mouthful of teeth like dinner forks from munching Zoon for its dinner.

'Right gang,' said Zool, striking heroic pose



number 214, 'all we have to do now is find him.' He paused, allowing the meagre breeze to play across his clothing, for dramatic effect.

But that was easier said than done when the jungle grows over in seconds any path you've made. After taking just ten steps from their ship they were lost. That was two days ago and now things are just about to get a lot worse.

* * *

Zool and Zooz had been taking turns at hacking a trail through the undergrowth. One would cut a path

while the other kept a lookout for any jungle dwelling thingy that might fancy them as a light snack. It took all of their Ninja abilities to keep them going but even so, Zool and Zooz began to tire after a while, Zool slipping into an uncharacteristic bad temper.

It wasn't that their enemies were tough to fight as a two finger nerve jab here, a K'kerlig Kouch kick there and liberal use of power blades and blaster was usually all that was needed to dispatch the creatures; it was just that there were so many of them and the valiant trio had to battle every centimetre of the way to where they thought Mental Block had landed. Just as the jungle nightmares were beginning to get the better of their exhaustion, they stumbled on a tiny clearing. Their hearts raced with

the anticipation of battle, for they had discovered the hiding place of the shifty shapechanger, but they were in for the kind of unpleasant surprise that's like waking up to find someone's poured cold custard down the front of your pyjamas.

Mental Block was already in his ship and obviously making final pre-flight checks.

'He's getting away,' yelled Zooz, kicking off a giant centipede that was trying to gnaw at her toe.

But Zool was already gone, power blades drawn, launching himself through the air at the patched up spacecraft, its engine humming loudly in pre-launch mode.

Zool barely had time to take in Zooz's voice shouting a warning. He didn't think, he just reacted; spinning in mid air he changed direction landing away from the ship. He ducked sharply as he heard something whistle past his ear. Instinctively he dived back to where he knew Zooz and Zoon waited and all three of them took up defensive positions.

Mental Block leered out of the cockpit window, grinned manically and stuck out his tongue. It was just too much for Zool to take in his present temper. He tried making a break for it but no sooner had he moved than he felt a swish through the air and the ground in front of him was cut open; Zool jumped back instantly. Mental Block smiled with satisfaction and returned to whatever it was he was doing, a smug self-satisfied look creeping across his angles.

Zool looked up at the spaceship. 'There's something invisible between us and the ship,' he said, thrashing about with his power blades and trying to hit his unseen enemy, 'a guard posted to stop us getting any closer to the ship?'

'Guess old Blockhead doesn't want any company?' quipped Zooz.

'Well, he's going to have some whether he wants it or not,' said Zool. 'I've got an idea. Can you aim a wide burst energy blast at that pool over there', he pointed at a hole full of brown, smelly water and bits of plant, 'when I give the word.'

'Sure, but what good will that do?' asked Zooz.

'Trust me,' grinned Zool.

Zoon, sensing something important, and probably very dangerous, was about to happen, backed away, both of his heads figuring that at times like this it was best to leave it to the experts. Zool took a careful step forward towards the spaceship. The attack came a split second afterwards, as he'd thought. He flipped over backwards, avoiding the rush through the air of the invisible blades, landed and spun like a propeller, his power blades a blur.

'NOW!' he shouted.

Zooz shot a plasma blast directly into the heart of the putrid pool sending an eruption of muck up into the air that returned as a filthy downpour on the trio and their unseen attacker. Only it wasn't unseen anymore thanks to the sudden shower. Outlined by

the deluge of slime and leaves from the pool was a mechanical nightmare.

A Butcherbot. It had been standing behind them, blocking their escape and using dozens of fusion cleavers and energy swords gripped by its numerous arms to discourage them. Zool and Zooz gripped their weapons tighter and prepared for battle.

The Butcherbot's sensors focused only on them as it charged, arms flailing, geared legs pumping beneath it. Both heroes backflipped out of its reach. Zoon, who was directly in its path, was arguing with himself about which way to run when both heads turned and saw the Butcherbot zooming towards them.

The robot barely had time to react. Its mechanical mind hadn't considered the strange two headed creature in front of it to be a threat until it was too late. Only then did it notice its legs had suddenly stopped moving but its body hadn't. A hard lesson in momentum was coming up as the robot tripped over Zoon (who by now had closed both sets of eyes and was muttering his prayers). Zoon had acted like a trip wire and the Butcherbot went down.

The deadly machine hefted a deadly cleaver high above his head and aimed it at its closest target, determined to take someone out on the way down. That target was Zooz. Zool leapt into the air in an attempt to lop it off before the blade connected with Zooz's precious flesh, but he needn't have worried. With Zooz's blaster still set on wide burst a single shot caused the cleaver to dissolve in a mess of molten metal. Seeing that Zooz was safe, Zool contorted, flipped and reversed, and with a neat scissor action from his twin power blades, removed the head from the machine before it had even touched the ground, turning it into scrap-metal.

'Outstanding!' said Zool. 'It's the first time something's gone right for us since we set foot on this greenhouse from Hell!'

Suddenly the ground began to shake and tremble beneath their feet.

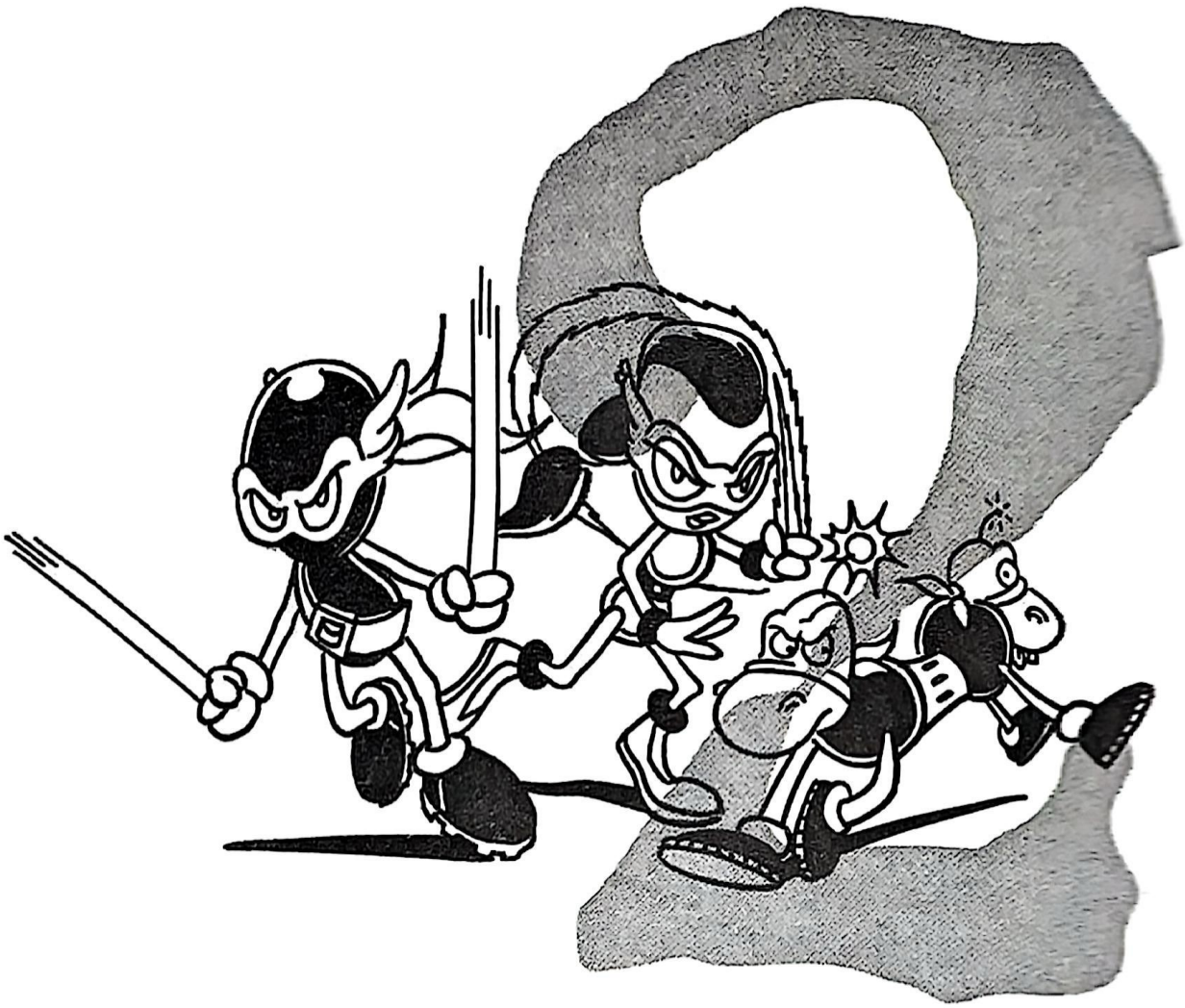
'Not quite, honeybunch,' said Zooz. 'Look who's about to leave town without us,' she said, pointing towards Mental Block's ship.

'Well, I hope that makes you feel a whole lot better!'

Said the robot's head, now missing most of its body. 'Just mindless vandalism I call it,' but no one was listening.

All they could do was watch powerless as the spaceship slowly lifted off, turned, and thundered off into the sky. Mental Block waved to them from the cockpit window and although he couldn't lip read, Zool just knew what Blockster was saying,

'SO LONG, SUCKERS!'



FUTILE ESCAPE

'Well, that's just great!' said Zool, his face screwed up like an angry prune. 'We're lost in the middle of a green salad that wants to eat us and we've just let the bad guy slip through our fingers!'

Zoon was growing worried about his friend. They'd all been in sticky situations before but Zool had never acted so oddly. Both heads suddenly stared at Zool and they couldn't believe their eyes.

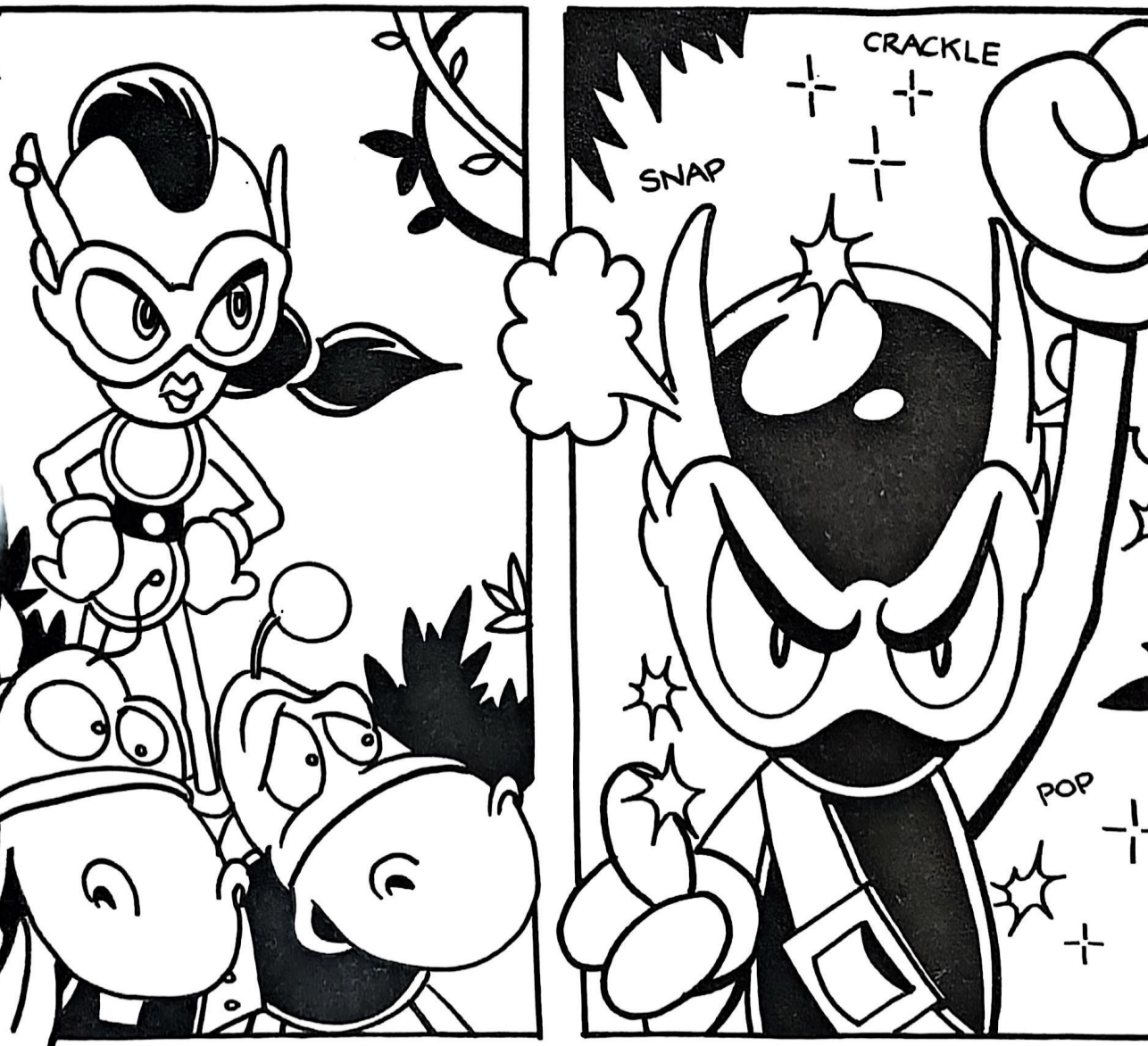
'Do you see what we see?' he said to Zooz.

'I'm seeing it but I haven't a clue what it is I'm seeing,' she replied.

Zool was glowing bright red and he didn't seem to notice. All he did was stamp around and shout more and more.

'I know he's been in a stonkingly bad mood since we got here but this is ridiculous!' said Zooz.

'Marvellous! Terrific! Happy! Happy! Happy! Joy! Joy! Joy!' he shouted to no one in particular, not noticing the fiery red sparks starting to shoot from his body. 'What's going to go wrong next?'



Zool loses his temper

The jungle exploded.

There was a blinding flash of red light and Zoon and Zooz found themselves whizzing through the air before landing in the squishy branches of rubber trees. Zooz picked herself up and tried to shake the fuzziness out of her head. Her body felt like it had been used as a trampoline by a family of Rhinozillas (a weird, armour-plated animal with bad breath and big feet, similar to a rhinoceros except it has eighty-six feet).

As she picked herself up, she spotted Zoon dangling from a branch by his teeth.

'Get us down from here! We can't hold on much longer!' he cried.

Zooz swung down on a vine, scooped up Zoon in one arm and landed on the jungle floor. Or would have done if it hadn't been blown flat by the explosion. In the middle of the blast zone was a large crater. In the centre of it was Zool.

* * *

By the time they'd got Zool out of his hole, night had already fallen. Zool's red body had cooled down now but it still gave off a faint glow, although his temper hadn't really cooled down with it.

They were all dog tired but Zool wanted to carry on looking for the ship, arguing that the sooner they left the planet the better.

'We'd be better off making camp and resting here for the night,' said Zooz soothingly, 'we can carry on searching in the morning.'

'I am the greatest superpowered Ninja warrior of the **Nth Dimension**,' shouted Zool, 'not some boy scout on a trip to the woods. ***I DON'T NEED TO REST.***'

He stood there glaring at Zooz, his shoulders heaving with the exertion of breathing.

Zooz folded her arms and cocked her head slightly to one side.

'How are you going to see the ship in the dark, unless you happen to walk into it?'

Zool paused mid-rant. He hadn't thought of that. You had to hand it to her, she wasn't just a pretty

face. She was right, of course, but he felt so full of energy that he could take on Krool, right now, here... He wanted a fight so much it hurt.

'Zool, what is it!?'

Zool was suddenly aware of where he was again. The gentle voice of Zooz had brought him back from the brink of another frenzy.

'What's happening to me,' asked Zool wretchedly. Part of the training of a Ninja warrior was complete control over mind and body, and Zool wasn't used to losing it – except when he wanted to of course – and it worried him deeply.

Zooz sat Zool down on a tree stump and set about making camp. She cast a cosmic ring of protection around a small clearing to keep the larger jungle creatures at bay while Zoon started the fire. They all sat around the fire on stumps as night descended. The green glow of the day was replaced very quickly by the impenetrable shadow of jungle night.

'I've been thinking about what might be happening to you,' said Zooz, her arm around her friend. A little blue creature with six legs, the body of a bird and the head of a miniature horse scuttled away from where they sat. The creature was so odd it even made Zooz pause.

'Eh... yeah, anyway,' continued Zooz, 'we know that the **Nth Dimension** is created as a result of the imaginative energies of countless billions of life forms throughout the pan-dimensional expanse that

is the multiverse; that the worlds here, being created from the positive neural impulses from sentient minds, are fabulous and fun places to hang out, and that you, me and Zoon are the embodiment of all that is good, just and heroic in people, right?'

'Yeah, right... I think I know.' said Zool, feeling really sorry for himself.

'OK, so where are we now?'

Zool looked around for a long time. As he looked his mood changed visibly. When he finally spoke it was in low, dangerous tones. 'We're on another one of Mental Block's fiendish creations, whose only purpose is to destroy us and give him free rein to bring forth the diabolical Krool to obliterate the **Nth Dimension** and reduce the multiverse to a boring grey void of TV quiz shows, train spotters' clubs and crocheted anoraks.'

'Cool it sweetheart, you're sparking again. Just look around. Mental Block couldn't have created something as complex as this. This place is teeming with life. Just look around.'

Zool scanned the area. For the first time he had a long hard look. As his senses sharpened he noticed more and more life: in the air, on the leaves, in the trees, on the ground, even under the ground, all crawling over each other in a living carpet – all the life was part of the jungle. He could see it now: the jungle was like a prison for the life but the life made the prison that was the jungle.

'Can you see?' whispered Zooz.

'Hey, deeply strange! What is it?' murmured Zool.

'I've been thinking about that and I have a theory based on all the data from our ship's navigational computer, our experiences together and other bits and pieces of information I've managed to gather so far. Now, what if thoughts and feelings are polarised,' said Zooz, 'and like thoughts attract so that good thoughts get together to form fun places and...' She gave Zool a little time to digest the idea.

'That would mean...' he began.

They turned to look at each other, the terrible realisation freezing them in their tracks.

'That's right, bad ones get together too!' said Zooz.

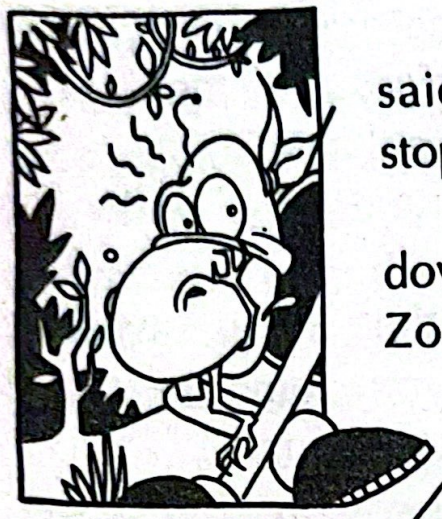
'And those... things?' said Zool, indicating the jungle in general and speaking in a hushed voice.

'Well,' Zooz dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, 'I think those slimy, multi-legged creatures are the physical manifestations of antisocial behavioural transferals of latent intentions of maledictions against other sentient beings!'

'Eh... you what?' Zool was no dummy, but sometimes Zooz spoke absolute gibberish.

'Zool, we're on a planet of evil, surrounded by bad vibes.'

There was a second of tense silence as they both assimilated the huge importance of this new discovery. They heard a crunch behind them. They spun round almost simultaneously and saw Zoon resting on a fallen tree, looking at them with curiosity.



'That's terribly interesting,' said Zoon. 'Please don't let me stop you.'

Zool's eyes followed a line down Zoon's body to the back of Zoon's other head. It looked to Zool like he was chewing.

'What's in your mouth?' said Zool, slowly standing up.

'Nummphfing,' mumbled Zoon.

Zool walked round to get a better look. As the side of Zoon's head came into view Zool suddenly became horribly aware that there were little legs sticking out of Zoon's mouth.

'STOP IT!' screamed Zool.

The vile beast was eating one of the bad vibes!

Zoon was so shocked that one end dropped the thing, which scurried off into the jungle, the other end choked and both ends tried to run off in different directions.

Zool shook his head. 'You,' he said, 'should have been born a waste disposal incinerator.' He turned back to Zooz, shades of green playing across his face, not all of them were to the jungle.

'OK, so now we know what we're up against,' said Zool 'but how does that help us find the ship?'

'I've got an idea about that too' said Zooz.

'Thought you would,' whispered Zool under his breath.

'Right, get this. I've heard that if you have bad thoughts it's difficult to keep your mind on what's important to you, like friends, work, family...'

'The spaceship?' ventured Zool.

'Exactly! I think the planet is making us miss the ship.'

'That still doesn't explain why I'm feeling so powerful though, does it?' *I run rings round her logic*, thought Zool.

'I think,' said Zooz patiently, 'that the bad vibes are affecting us at a very basic level. I don't think you are more powerful, just more angry. You see, that's a weak point in your character.'

'I don't have a weak point in my character!' said Zool indignantly.

'OK, OK,' said Zooz in soothing tones, trying to heal Zool's damaged ego, 'but it's affecting us all. Zoon's only negative point is his eating compulsion, and look what he tried to eat.'

'How's it affecting you then?' queried Zool.

'I'm not quite sure. I'm finding it difficult to think. I keep getting these unfamiliar and disturbing mental images. High-heeled and impractical boots, gemstones attached to chains and metal things that should go through my ears, strangely shaped soft

helmets adorned with flowers and full length garments without tubes to put my legs into... and face paint and alcohol based scents. It's horrible.'

'So all I have to do is clear away all these bad vibes to uncover the ship?' A look of determination settled itself on Zool's face. 'Don't worry beautiful, butt-busting babe, I'll soon have this lot cleared.'

In her current distracted state Zooz was a little too slow in picking up on what Zool intended to do. Before she could stop him, he leapt straight up into the air, well above the highest tree, and delivered a devastating blast of cosmic energy that reduced to ashes more than ten car parks' worth of jungle.

But as he looked around again, preparing for another blast, he saw with dismay that the jungle was creeping in on the devastated area like slime. At that moment the jungle never looked more alive. Anger and frustration was beginning to take its toll on Zool. Zooz could see that in his current stressed state, combined with the effect the bad vibes were having, it wouldn't be too long before he would lose control completely and then imagination only knew what might happen.

She had to figure out quickly a way to get to see the ship, before Zool got bored with shooting the jungle and exploded again. She knew that they were near the central power source of the **Nth Dimension**, the Nexus, and therefore, that weaker imagination had more power. She also knew that

these imaginations tended to stick together. Now, if small bad imaginations had lots of little manifestations at the centre of the **Nth Dimension**, surely one really good imagination would manifest too, which would mean that there would be good and bad vibes in the same place which should cause them to cancel each other out, for at least long enough to give them a chance to find the ship.

'I've got it!' screeched Zooz, making Zoon jump, scaring the poor creature half out of his wits. 'Zool, it's simple. All you have to do is imagine something really good, really worthwhile, in order to combat the bad vibes.'

Zool understood immediately. He cleared his mind as much as possible, blocking out the annoyance of the bad vibes, and went into the brief trance necessary to summon up magical energy from the **Nth Dimension**. He felt the power ebbing and flowing though the multiverse in a colossal tide of thought and imagination. Tapping directly into it, he began to think. He had no option but to let his imagination run riot.

The one purpose in Zool's life is to defeat the forces of Krool and, in his imagination, he really kicked some Cosmic Evil Doer tail end. He imagined tracking Krool down to the fabled Temple of Oblivion, fighting through a carpet of Mental Block's twisted creations, and smashing the mythical Alter of Drear Reality, where Krool himself is reputed to hold audience.

Pure imagination was flowing into him, but he couldn't imagine quickly enough to use up all the power. He was beginning to overflow. Zooz and Zoon watched in awe as Zool imagined away. All sorts of strange things were coming out of the vast column of blue light that had enveloped Zool, almost obscuring him.

'Good evening, señora' said a sinister little midget with a bucket and a mop who started trying to clean up the mess left by the hail of exploding red sausages that had just materialised. A large dog with a shark fin scooted here and there following a dark haired woman who was bedecked with jewellery and wore a camarillo brillo (a sort of cross between a halo and a Mexican poncho). She threw an odd confused look at Zooz and climbed onto the broom she was carrying, grabbed

the dog by its fin and launched herself into the sky.

Slowly but surely something started to take shape in the column of light around Zool. The more he thought about freeing the multiverse from the evil of Krool, the more distinct the manifestation became.

When Zool finally opened his eyes he was confronted with his creation. It was 200 metres of towering chrome power. Up in the sky, high above the trees, twin handles hung, like the elegant necks of a pair of metal swans. The necks plunged down into the steel gun-metal blue body of the monster, which flared slightly before reaching the long, razor sharp blades sweeping majestically over the jungle floor. As they all stared it idled its 5000 horse-powered engine. Zoon looked on in wonder, Zooz looked on it in amazement and Zool looked on with pride at the biggest lawnmower the universe had ever seen.

As the mower revved its enormous engine the jungle began, almost imperceptively, to vibrate, then quiver, then shake until, when the lawnmower had reached full revs, it felt like there was an earthquake going on; Zool, Zooz and Zoon could almost feel the fear the jungle experienced at the destructive power of this mighty mower.

'It's fantastic,' said Zooz.

'What?' shouted Zool over the roar of the engine.

'I SAID', yelled Zooz, **'THAT IT'S FANTASTIC**

'YEAH, I KNOW,' hollered Zool. Turning to his new creation he patted it lovingly on one of the six exhaust pipes and whispered: *'Go get 'em boy.'*

* * *

Once the mower had gone about its work of jungle clearance it was a relatively simple task to find the ship. The ***PURE THOUGHT*** was indeed a spectacular vessel. It measured almost 100 metres from bow to stern. It glittered and gleamed like a silver bullet, looking beautiful but deadly all at the same time.

All the living space and operations rooms were situated in the missile-shaped central cylinder that tapered majestically down to a needle point at the bow, its twin mirrored screens making the ship look like an eagle with shades. The wings of the bird were underslung, so that it hovered, apparently, only centimetres above the ground. The engines, mounted top side at the back, were vast, and delivered enough power to tow a small moon. Everything about the ship spoke of grace and power. Of course, it wasn't just a mode of transport; it also bristled with weaponry.

Once on board Zool checked the systems of the ship with the sort of care normally reserved for over-protective mothers with their children on the first day of school.

Zool shouted out the systems and Zoon checked them off as Zooz, sitting in the co-pilot's seat, did the pre-flight checks with cool and practised efficiency:

Life support - **CHECK**
Communications - **CHECK**
Navigation - **CHECK**
Drive system - **CHECK**
Music system - **CHECK**
Cosmic Canons - **CHECK**
Butt-Buster Bolters - **CHECK**
Motorhead Missile guidance system - **CHECK**

By the time Zool had finished doing the system checks the ship was ready to take off. Zoon took up his position of Communications and Navigation.

'Power up!' ordered Zool. The ship hummed into life as Zooz hit the reactor activate switch.

'Activate anti-gravity.' The ship very gently lifted off the ground.

'Engage engines!' Zool placed a hand on the power control and slammed it all the way to the top.

'We're outta here!'

The ship shot forward and all the occupants of the cabin were flattened into their seats by the force of acceleration. Zool didn't relax his grip off the power control until they were well away from the planet.

When they'd finally reached pursuit speed, Zool started barking orders.

'Zoon, I want a full sweep scan of the area. I want you to find that crook Mental Block.'

'But Zool, honeybunch, the trail is cold! We'll never pick up an ion track now.'

Zool hated it when she called him honeybunch. He was an alien ninja for heaven's sake; he was more your 'vortex of vicious vengeance', 'honeybunch' was just so uncool. However, he knew Zooz was right – they'd never find Mental Block's trail now – but Zool never liked to admit defeat.

'Zoon, plot a course for Party sector.'

Zoon snapped to it, laying the course into the navigational computer to take them back to where they had been before Mental Block had led them away. The ship made a smooth, banking turn and cruised along its course at Warp Factor 9.

'I've been thinking,' said Zool, 'that Mental Block must be up to something.' He rested his feet on the control panel and pushed himself into his chair, hands crossed behind his neck.

'It's pretty obvious now that we were led to that planet in order to be trapped,' Zool mused. 'Why else would Mental Block have left without a fight. But he must have known that the planet wouldn't be able to keep us forever, that eventually we'd get off.'

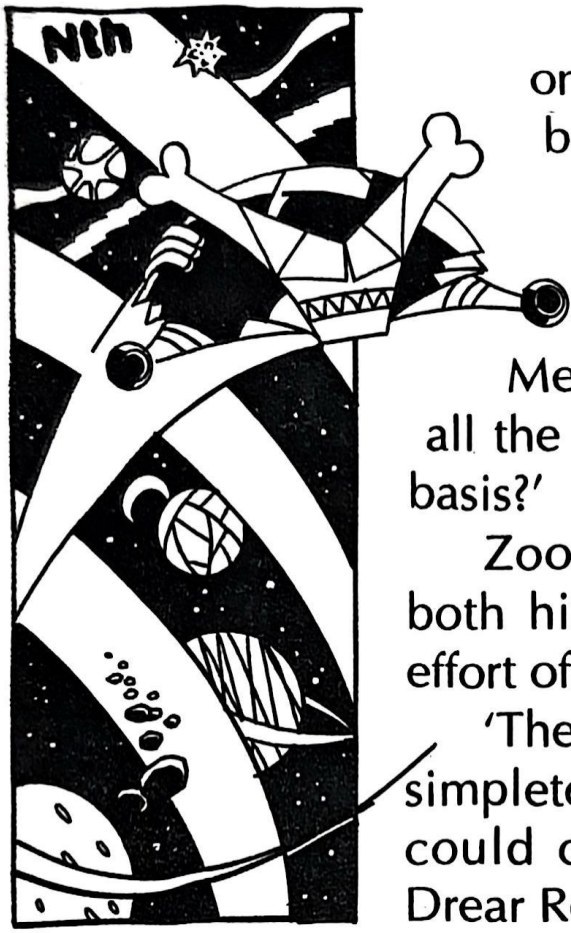
'Perhaps it was never his intention to keep us there,' Zooz said, walking slowly to where the navigational computer was. She studied the screen, calling up several three-dimensional maps. 'He led us up to a planet close to the nexus point between the **Nth Dimension**, the Mundane World and the Void. He must know this little travelled area well, because he knew exactly what effect the planet would have on us. So the question is, why has Mental Block got detailed knowledge of the Nexus sector?'

'Perhaps he uses some of the worlds there to test out new creations?' ventured Zoon. 'Or p'raps e just likes the peace 'n quiet,' said Zoon's other half.

'Yeah, but what if he's travelled to and from the nexus, on a fairly regular basis?' said Zool rising to his feet.

'My thoughts exactly!' Zooz stood up and faced Zool. The air was electric between them, anticipation showing on both of their faces.

'Would someone mind telling me what you're getting so excited about?' asked Zoon, hopping from



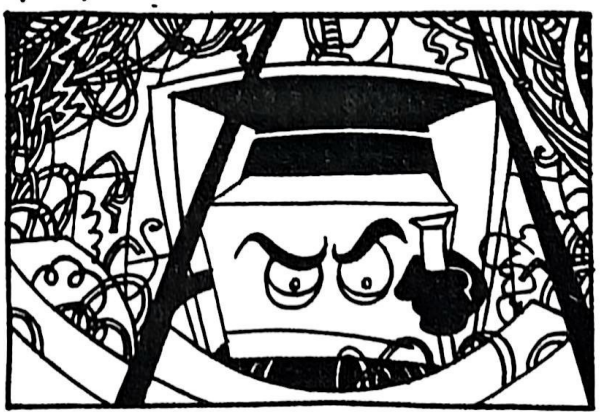
one leg to another, infected by the air of excitement.

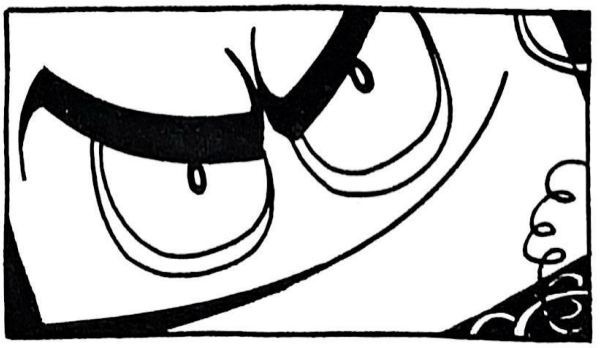
'Don't you see,' squealed Zooz, 'what possible reason could Mental Block have to come all the way out here on a regular basis?'

Zoon still looked perplexed, both his brows knotted with the effort of thought.

'The Temple of Oblivion, you simpleton!' He delayed us so he could commune at the Altar of Drear Reality, with Krool himself!'

* * *





At that moment Mental Block was speeding his way through the outer reaches of the **Nth Dimension**. He sat in a sunken pit surrounded on three sides by dials, read-outs, buttons and levers. On the forth side a vast, sickly

green glowing screen showed him where he was going. Bits of old wire hung between the panels like lengths of broken straw. He looked like a loathsome metal bird sitting in a techno nest. He leaned back into his pilot's box and a smug grin began to creep across his front face.

So, he had managed to evade Zool for three days! It was his own plan and it had worked beautifully. The grin was wiped off by a memory, then anger replaced it as Mental Block recalled his meeting with Krool. Krool hadn't even mentioned the fact that he, Mental Block, had single-handedly guaranteed a trouble-free meeting. *One day,* Mental Block thought, *I'll be the master and you'll have to do my bidding.* He allowed himself the luxury of an evil chuckle.

The plan that Krool had come up with was intricate and brilliant, making Mental Block dizzy with the anticipation of evil deeds yet to come. To think, in just a few short planetary rotations Krool will have been brought in through the great barrier to the Mundane World; he, Mental Block, would be ruler of the **Nth Dimension** and Zool, hated enemy of dullness and conformity would be, at worst, a mindless slave, and at best, blasted out of existence.

For the second time that day Mental Block let forth an evil cackle, that turned into a snigger that eventually mutated into an insane giggle as he set about implementing Krool's plan to finally conquer the universe.

* * *

Zool's instincts screamed danger, but he had no idea where danger was. Mental Block was long gone, but where to? He could only try to anticipate trouble in the hope of getting to it before too much damage was done. Would the Blockster go for Moola Moola, the richest part of the **Nth Dimension**, or perhaps the Toy sector... Zool just couldn't be sure.

'Where are we?' asked Zool.

Zoon checked the charts. 'We're not far from the edge of the Party sector.'

'Very well,' said Zool 'plot us a direct course for Music world... I feel like a Rave, and I don't mean an all-night party!'

Zool pushed the ***PURE THOUGHT*** to the limit to get there, he hoped, in time. The images of what Mental Block would do to the innocent residents of Zool's favourite world played havoc with his imagination. Images like a slow motion film flickered across his mind; he saw the gleaming CD towers reduced to molten slag, the Notes scattered to the four corners of the planet and the pitiful wail of thousands of people, all dressed up with nowhere to go. Zool shuddered.

They hit the Party Zone well ahead of schedule and headed right for one of Mental Block's favourite targets, Music World. The ***PURE THOUGHT*** screamed through the atmosphere, tearing a hole in the cloud as it power-dived towards the surface, cannons primed and ready, missiles prepared. Zoon tracked for targets.

'Right, who's gunning for us!' shouted Zool.

'Eh... Captain?' said Zoon apologetically, 'I'm afraid that there appears to be no sign of conflict.'

'I don't believe it,' said Zool, 'there must be, look again.'

Zool flew low, at crawling speed, so that he could get a good look at what was going on. Handing the controls to Zooz, he got up from his pilot's seat and went to the rear of the ship, opening the hatch. Music flooded in. As he looked below he could see nothing out of the ordinary. Large herds of Notes scampered through the Fields of Beat at the approach of the ***PURE THOUGHT***, their bleats a multitude of tones and pitches, joining the other sounds of Music world, making a natural addition to the planet's symphony. Zool scanned the area. Everything seemed normal. The early evening light glinted off the CD towers and Zool could just make out the forms of hundreds of partying people, strutting their funky stuff and shaking their Nikes down to the ground in an endless rave/funk/disco/metal party; low-flying buggies bobbed and weaved through the streets, ferrying party goers from one venue to another in an endless stream of excitement; the inhabitants of Music world were no strangers to Zool. He was well known as THE party dude of the **Nth Dimension**, and the people waved and cheered as the ***PURE THOUGHT*** flew past and Zool waved back...

all was well.

Zool slammed the hatch and made for his seat.

'It's obvious he's not here,' said Zooz, 'so where to now, Ninja lord?'

'All we can do is carry on with our tour of duty. We have an obligation to protect the people of the **Nth Dimension**. We are their heroes and they would expect nothing less than our best. We know not what the twisted trickster has in mind so we must be vigilant! We must be ready! We must...'

'...Get some lunch, I'm starving!' Zoon hadn't eaten for far too long and even though he knew that interrupting a Ninja Warlock mid-sentence, especially during a rousing speech, was dangerous. When nature rang her little bell it just had to be answered.

Zool threw a withering warlock glance in Zoon's direction. Zoon caught it, tasted it, decided that it probably wasn't a good idea to swallow, and let it loose to flutter about the cabin until it got fed up with not having anywhere to settle and ceased to be.

'Sorry boss,' said Zoon.

* * *

After lunch they continued on their rounds. They decided to tour a few other places in the Party sector before popping next door to the sector of Play. Zoon, guided by his stomach, set a course for the world of Swift Provisions. The Fast Food world is where all the **Nth Dimension**'s hardy party revellers go when they want to get a quick snack. All fun food

originally came from there. You've probably heard of a few, like pizza, chips and burgers... but have you heard of wangers, Joop bread and snurgle beans? No? Well I shouldn't worry, you never know, if you use your imagination you might be the one to invent it! Zoon drooled at the thought of snurgle beans.

Zool decided to play it cool and approached slowly, scanning for signs of danger. When they entered close enough to get a picture on the scanner they could see the rapid stream of grub carriers speeding across the planet, from vast warehouses the size of moon hangers to kitchens big enough to cater for a whole Wembley football crowd, to the launch pads where hypercarriers waited to take the food across the Dimension to where it was needed. Suddenly an order of toffee and pepperoni pizza, a huge wanger burger with extra cheese and a double order of snurgle beans materialised in the cockpit.

'While we were here...' said Zoon guiltily.

There was still no sign of any trouble.

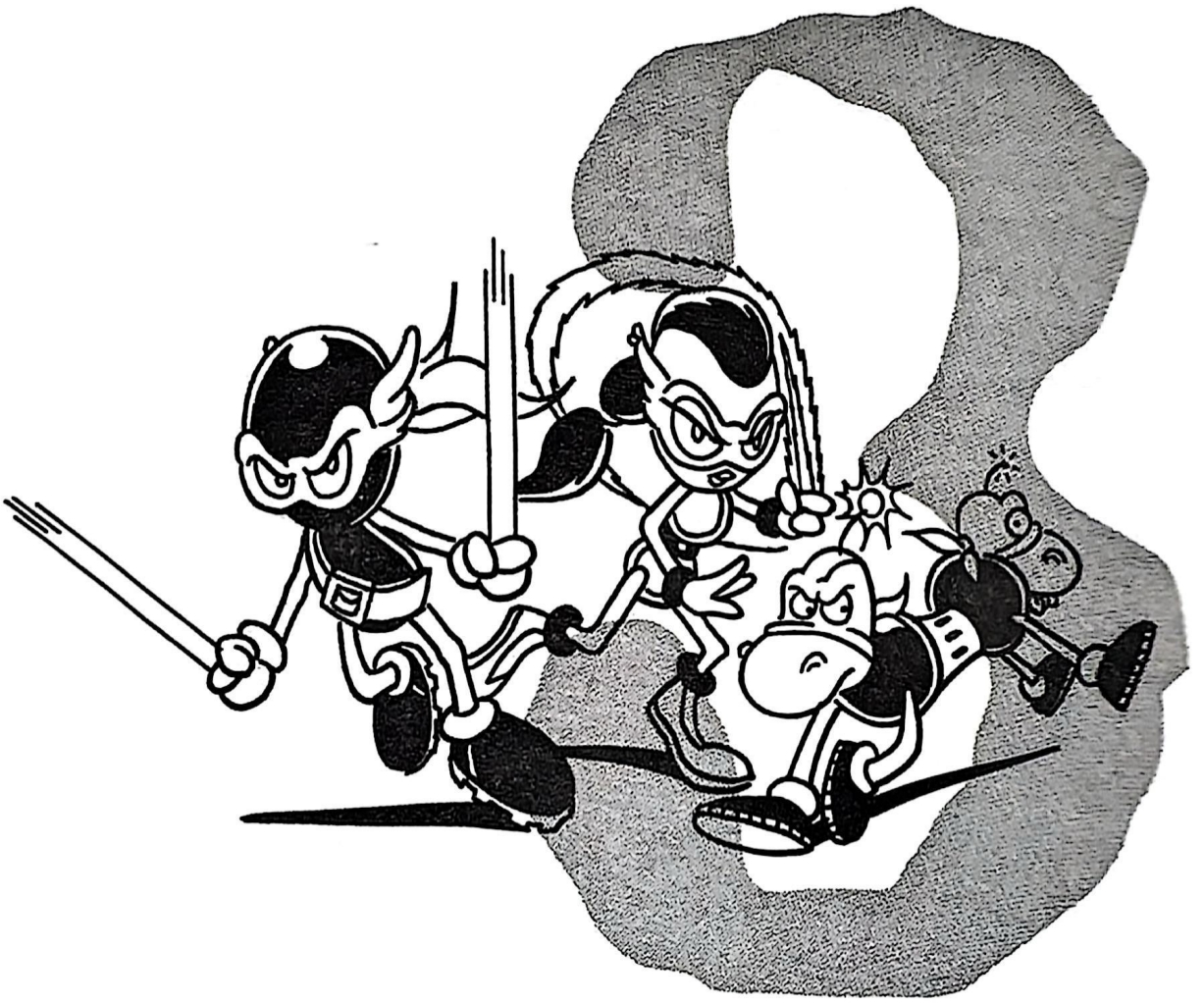
It was the same story all over the Party sector. On Moola Moola, not a blip. On the Catwalk, a small moon orbiting the seven floating seas of Rye (which is where Zool gets all his snappiest

gear) there was not a stitch out of place; even on Wayne's world, the base of the Entertainment sector, and one of Mental Block's prime targets, there wasn't a signal that had gone awry. All in all they spent almost two weeks searching the sector from side to side.

Catwalk City

'I don't understand it,' said Zool, musing over the remains of his dinner one evening. 'It's never this quiet.'

It certainly was strange. In the age old battle between the powers of Fun and Fury there had always been something happening on at least ten different worlds at the same time. Zool and the gang had spent most of their time getting to one place just in time to foil Mental Block's plans, only to have to dash to make their next appointment with danger. The only thing to do now was to carry on with the tour. Next stop, was the sector of Play.



PLOOKAS AND PUGILISTS

They landed on Low Tech world at tea time, and Zool immediately knew that something was wrong. On this world everything was manufactured. The cars used springs to make them move, the flowers had valves to give them scent, the trees used little gears to get their leaves to come out. Even the people and animals on Low Tech were artificial, or clockwork as they preferred to be called. It may

have been old technology, but it was beautiful in its complex sophistication. Normally the world was alive with industry, everyone bustling about here and there making hundreds of different types of gadgets, some of immeasurable use to the other inhabitants of the **Nth Dimension**, others just pretty playthings, socialising and generally going about their business. Now everything was still as a frozen river and quiet as a Friday afternoon maths test.

It was like someone had taken a picture of the scene and superimposed it on reality. Everything was paralysed. Not a person moved, not a bird twittered, not a dog barked and not a tree stirred.

The dynamic trio left the ship and walked through the landscape. Zool wasn't too familiar with this world. He was more your anti-grav speeding, power blade wielding, atomic detonator fielding Hi Tech Ninja warrior; he wasn't really into clockwork fruit – it just wouldn't generate the combination of healthy respect and dread fear if he wandered around with a wind-up war hound. Then something occurred to him.

'I know what's wrong: they've all wound down! All we have to do is wind them up!'

'You're all turning pink and growing flowers in your ears!' shouted Zoon.

'I don't think that's quite the sort of winding up he had in mind,' said Zooz.

They made their way to the main workshop and picked on a person at random. He was obviously

some sort of mechanical gardener. He was vaguely human in shape, with two arms, two legs and a head all roughly where you'd expect to find them. He was pale blue all over, except for his cog-shaped head and watering can full of oil which was green. His slightly strange shape gave the impression of a very old, crooked man. Once they'd found his key, which was easy to find as it stuck out of his face like a nose, it was simply a matter of giving him a little tweek to get him going again.

* * *

'So tell me, my sprocketed-headed friend, what happened here?' Zool had sent Zooz and Zoon to wind up the other people, who in turn wound up still more, while he talked to Caster.

Caster, as he turned out to be called, looked miserable. He could hardly speak. Zool sat him on a bench in one of the many mechanical gardens on Low Tech and stood firmly in front of him. The exquisite garden with all its mechanical wonders and technological impossibilities was no consolation to Caster. He could only look down and fidget with his fingers. Zool wondered what could possibly have happened here that was so terrible that this poor wretch couldn't even bring himself to talk about it. Zool glanced up as he waited for Caster to compose himself. It was a dull and oppressive day with the promise of rain in the clouds and of thunder in the air.

Zool knelt in front of Caster and looked up at his face.

'You have to tell me what happened,' he said in a gentle voice. 'I can't help if I don't know what's gone on. Just start at the beginning.'

Caster summoned all his strength and spoke.

'It all started when the Great Plooka summoned all the highest ranking craftsman in the world to his workshop. Of course this was a great honour and all of them attended. They all went in but not one of them came out. We went and asked him where all the technicians had gone and he told us that he'd sent them on an important task on a distant part of the planet. A week went by and The Great Plooka then ordered that there should be a stop to all winding in the entire world. We all thought it was a bit strange at the time, but he said it was for technical reasons, something to do with poor weather conditions affecting the keys or something, and it wouldn't have to be for very long. We tried going to talk to him but anyone who was admitted never came out. The Great Plooka just repeated his orders. Eventually we started running down.'

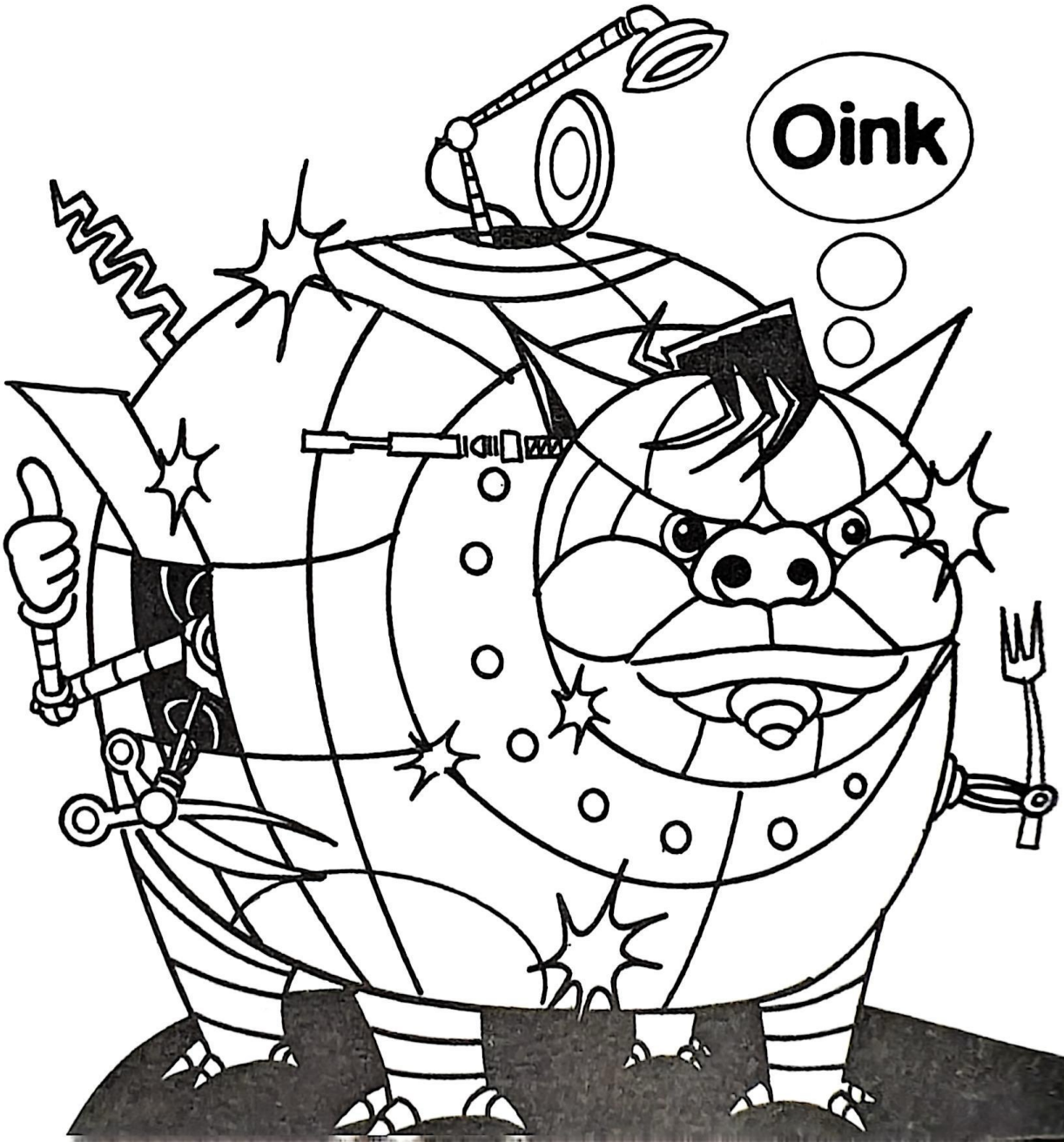
'Couldn't you have wound yourselves up a bit?' suggested Zool.

Caster, with pleading in his eyes as he finally looked up from his hands said, 'Who's going to argue with the Chome Pig?'

He did have a point. The Great Plooka was an awesome creature. The greatest technician in the

Universe, it was the Plooka who manufactured the whole of the Low Tech world as a sort of retirement home. Before that he acted as a technical consultant to several gods in the **Nth Dimension** and beyond. The Universe was pretty well built by now and he stayed on Low Tech mostly for the company, and to keep his hands busy making the odd tree here, a shoal of fish there, and of course toys.

The Great Plooka looked a bit like a cross between a three metre high chrome plated piggy



bank (hence the nickname, Chrome Pig) and a really expensive Swiss army knife, the type that only hardy Amazonian adventurers and posers have. The Great Plooka fairly bristled with gadgets, tools, devices, and contrivances that adorned his bulbous body as well as poking out of various recesses and popping up out of numerous panels. The Chrome Pig had always been an affectionate, kind and gentle leader – but now? Zool knew gods, he knew how fickle they could be. One minute they're turning water to wine, the next they're drowning you in it.

'I think we'd better go and have words with this Chrome Pig,' said Zool in an authoritative tone. 'Sound's to me like the big C has finally flipped! Where is he?'

'It's not far from here,' said Caster 'he's in the Workshop.' His tone had dropped to a reverent whisper.

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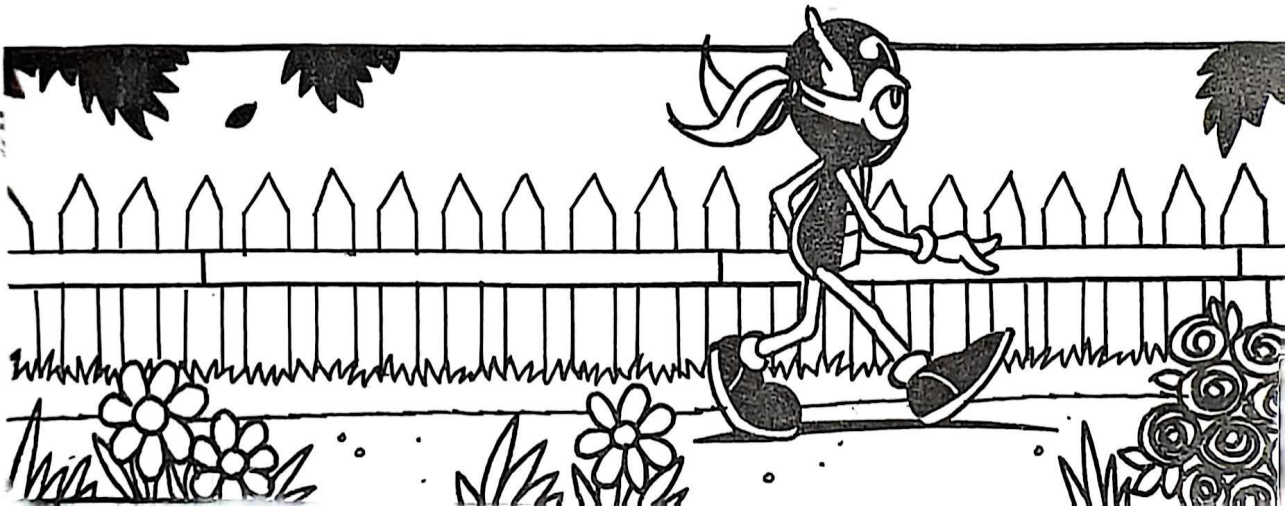
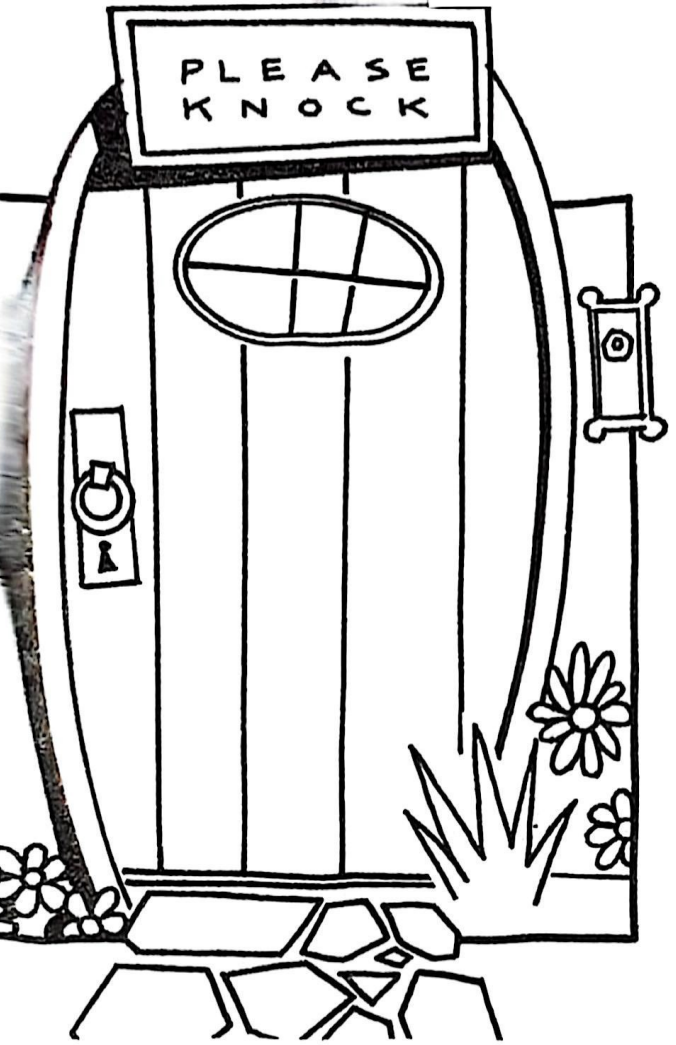
Zool had half expected to see a huge rambling cathedral complete with gargoyles and bell tower; at the very least there should have been an immense gleaming factory, flawless in its execution of the





Great Plooka's designs, full of tanks and pipes and machines and flashing lights. What Zool didn't expect was a tiny cottage. It was perfect in every detail with a colourful, real organic garden in full bloom, thatched roof and white picket fence. A sign on the gate read **'Plooka T. Plooka'**. The whole scene looked like something out of a fairy-tale, the type involving children, old crones and lots of sharp kitchen utensils.

Zool squared up to the gate. 'Right, you stay here, I won't be long.'

But Caster had gone.

Zool wasn't surprised. In fact, he was glad. It's always better to talk to powerful beings when no one else was around because, for some reason, innocent people always tended to get in the way when the lightning bolts started to fly. He walked down the garden path past the sweetly smelling flowers and tasteful shrubbery, and rang the front door bell. A sign lit up above the door saying, 'Please knock.' So Zool knocked and waited.

Zool considered what to say when he met the Great Plooka. He had to point out, politely, that the

people of Low Tech had been put to some considerable inconvenience by his order to unwind and that he was here to help, should his mightiness so desire it. He started to shift from one foot to the other, unconsciously doing an ancient Ninja limbering-up exercise. Zool was about as laid back as it was possible to be without being horizontal, but even he was beginning to let Caster's fear and respect for the Great Plooka get to him.

He heard something approach the door and he pulled himself up to his full height, adopting the formal stance of a full Ninja Warlock. The door opened with a slow, deliberate creak and a voice like brittle wood hissed through the gap.

'My master has been expecting you.'

'Has he? I've only just arrived.' *Oh well,* mused Zool as he walked through the open door, *all-seeing beings and all that.* He felt a little more relaxed. The voice had come from a small, evidently ancient mechanical butler. Its many arms, mounted on a cylindrical body, looked like they'd been made out of old coat hangers; its voice box consisted of a couple of balloons and a pair of old bellows, and it squeaked annoyingly as it moved gradually across the hall on four coasters.

'Follow me,' it said.

Zool glanced around. It was a lot bigger on the inside than the outside. In fact, it was more like a mansion than a cottage. The whole place was dark, and Zool noticed it was a little dusty. He saw that there were four doors leading off the main hall, two on either side of the stairs that stretched up into darkness in front. A full hat stand stood next to him.

'Please leave your hat, coat and any weapons here please.'

It was then Zool realised that he had come without his normal arsenal of deadly sidearms. It had been so quiet he just hadn't picked them up. The thunder growled a warning outside. Well, how

DANGEROUS

could it possibly be here? He followed the butler down the hall to the last door on the left, which was open. Zool could see over the butler's head that they were entering a storeroom. Crammed shelves stretched all the way to the ceiling, laden with materials, tools and strange contraptions the use of which Zool hadn't got a clue about. 'Zooz would have a field day in here,' he said to no one in particular. As they walked through the gloom he noticed that the place was messy and disorganised and he could see hundreds of half-finished pieces of equipment and gadgets.

'This way, Sir,' said the butler, making for another door at the far end of the enormous room. When they got to the door the butler stopped.

'Through there, Sir,' he said, and quickly scurried off, back into the dimness of the storeroom.

Again the thunder boomed. Zool took this to be a warning for him to be careful. He had a bad feeling about this place. He never liked going anywhere without at least some kind of deadly energy weapon strapped to his side. It wasn't that he needed them, of course, he just liked the look on people's faces when he started brandishing something like a Maxiquat Mk IV sub atomic particle accelerator (and it made pretty colours when it hit a target). He took a deep breath, opened the door and entered.

The room was vast, not just big, not just huge, not even ginormous, but absolutely *vast*, seeming to stretch on forever; it was the type of vast only normally found in deep space or in the dark corners of your bedroom late at night. Stretching off into the distance, and on either side, was row upon row of shelves, their tops lost in the gloom that hid the ceiling, and each shelf was crammed with toy soldiers. Some were life size, some scaled down, others in miniature, but representing, Zool thought, every planet, in every system, in every galaxy of the universe. A yellow path led from the door deep into the room.

'Anyone home?' he shouted as he started to follow the path. But he could see no one. Where was everybody? The door slammed shut behind him. Somehow, he'd expected that. The massed ranks of

the universal soldiers loomed above him and around him, their staring lifeless eyes seeming to follow his movements deeper into the room. He followed the path for what seemed to Zool, miles. Further down the path it seemed to be getting very slightly lighter and he noticed, just a few meters ahead of him, a meagre clearing in the forest of shelves. As he got closer he could see that there were scraps of metal near the clearing.

'One of the toy soldiers must have fallen off the shelf,' thought Zool. Then he noticed that there was a little carbon scoring on the floor by some of the bits. That indicated energy weapon fire. Why would there be energy weapons going off in a room full of toys?

'Oh dear,' realised Zool 'I'm in deep trouble.' It was then that he remembered the slight sheen of dust, the dishevelled state of the storeroom and the hatstand, the very full hatstand, by the door in the hall! Caster had said that the Plooka had sent everyone out to a distant part of the planet but Zool now knew they hadn't gone. For the first time he looked really hard at the toy soldiers. They were in all shapes and sizes, as are all the peoples of the universe, and being soldiers, they were all carrying weapons. But the swords were metal and glinted like scalpels, the axes looked very heavy and functional, and even the guns looked like they were loaded. 'I should have known,' thought Zool. A terrible sinking feeling came over him. He felt like a fly in a web.

'Zooz,' he muttered, 'now would be a good time to get your comely, chancy self down here.'

He stood stock still, hardly breathing. He had to think. How would he load a trap like this. First rule of combat – know your enemy; so this trap had probably been designed with the inhabitants of this planet in mind – not an alien Ninja – so that put him at an advantage. Second rule of combat - expect the unexpected; so there were probably contingency arrangements if the main trap, whatever it was, didn't work. Third rule of combat - reserve your energy; so the trap would be quick. Fourth rule of combat - never give your enemies time to think.

Zool backflipped away just in time to avoid a repeating high energy beam that shot down at a steep angle from somewhere in the roof. The beams followed his path as he flipped hand over foot backwards, only ever missing him by centimetres. If Zool was right in his thinking, the beams should stop about ***NOW.*** And he landed on his feet. The firing stopped just in front of him. Well, he was right; the beam had a limited firing arc. As they were expecting people to run away, there was no need to have a free roving turret. He looked at the ground. No scoring. And he remembered that as he was backflipping he caught glimpses of the beams. They were stun beams, which meant that the people who had come to visit had been captured, not destroyed. Now it wasn't just a case of getting out himself but of rescuing captives as well.

His head whipped round as he heard a movement to his left, then his right, then behind him. They were coming out of the walls. The soldiers were animating. So this was the contingency. If the stun didn't get you then you were too dangerous to be allowed to live. Zool spared a thought for the poor wretch on the clearing floor. He had to act quickly. He couldn't possibly fight an entire army, so they'd just have to come and find him. He smiled.

One of the many skills of the Ninja warrior is the Cloak of Obscurement, or invisibility to you and me. How it works is a mystery, but the fact that it works had saved Zool's skin on more than one occasion. The invisibility only lasted a limited time, so Zool had to find the others and get out quick. He couldn't tune in to their life forces as Zool was now surrounded by beings of a similar life energy; it would be like trying to find a needle in a scrapyard with a magnet. But he could concentrate on the location of the mechanical life forces. Then he'd need an escape plan. But first things first: the captives.

The soldiers were beginning to swarm off the shelves, all looking for an enemy to attack. Zool had to jump over lifesized Vl'hurg swamp warriors, dart round spiky Chaos marines and hop from one foot to another to avoid a plague of small, furry and heavily armed killer gerbils. Zool was picking up some life force reading from high up in the air above him. These had to be the prisoners. All he needed now was a weapon to knock out the stun beam which

had got his life force reading and would, therefore, be able to see him. He looked around for a suitable weapon. He was like a kid in a sweet shop. With an example of just about every weapon ever made to choose from it was going to be tough. Should he go for a bolter or a blaster; a light sabre or a laser? In the end Zool decided to go for style rather than efficiency and found himself a Maxiquat Mk IV sub atomic particle accelerator. It belonged to an evil-looking bad tempered Cricket warrior, who lasted all of .00005 seconds against a Tiger strike to the back of his backside.

Zool, now armed, decided to make his move. Positioning himself directly under where he thought the captives were, he leapt straight up. He caught hold of a support beam and swung himself over in a graceful, silent arc, landing with his weapon at the ready, crouched and prepared to pounce at the least sign of danger. He could see the cage where the prisoners were being held; he counted ten of them, all completely motionless. Just underneath was mounted the stun cannon – which was at that very moment turning to bring its twin ion ports to bear down on Zool. He knew that as soon as he fired, thousands of primed and ready weapons wielded by thousands of soldiers beneath would be turned in his direction. Zool estimated about six seconds before the roof of the building, as well as him and all the prisoners, resembled holey Swiss cheese. He had to buy some time.

He slung his gun over his shoulder and quickly dived directly for the stun cannon before it had a chance to fire. He caught it with one hand and launched himself up into the air, landing on top of the prisoners' cage. With enormous strength he peeled back a corner of the crude metal roofing sheet and dropped inside with a barely perceptible thud.

'**Hello**,' said a small voice by his foot. Zool looked down and saw a small, bright yellow duck staring up at him with young, excited eyes. It blinked at him. 'My name's George. Where am I, what's happening and who are you?'

'Weirdness follows me around like a lovesick Lama in lambing season,' muttered Zool.

He took a deep breath.

'OK duck, here's the deal. We're trapped, hanging several metres above the ground in a metal box with ten unconscious mechanical people on a world of automatons. Above us is a roof made from some sort of material that by its very nature makes it impossible to break through from the inside. Below us are countless thousands of bloodthirsty toy soldiers from across space and time, all armed to the teeth who, if they get one sniff of me up here, will open fire on this flimsy box. Considering how much weaponry is down there it should be a spectacular display, only we'll be too busy dodging bullets to appreciate it. I'm afraid it gets worse. We can't try to creep away either because there's a stun cannon directly underneath us so any attempt to leave the

cage will result in immediate recapture and a blinding headache, and I' said Zool, pausing for dramatic effect, 'am Zool, here to rescue you. Now come on duck, make yourself useful and start winding these guys up.'

With that, Zool set about rewinding all the folk who'd been captured. The duck did its best but being only ten centimetres long and terrified beyond the capacity for rational thought, it wasn't actually much use.

The mechanical people were a little groggy at first, but Zool soon discovered from them the horrible truth of what had happened in the Plooka workshop. Like just about everything else evil that happened anywhere in the **Nth Dimension**, Mental Block had been involved.

These people weren't the technicians at all, but servants and people who'd come for an audience with the Great Plooka. It turned out that the brutal blockster had landed on Low Tech about three weeks ago. He'd masqueraded as the Chrome Pig and caused the whole world to grind to a halt while the real Plooka was kidnapped and taken off for destinations unknown. The technicians had also been taken away, along with various bits of equipment from the storeroom. The blockster had really outdone himself this time.

'So if I might venture to summarise,' said Proogle Hertwig, the Mayor of Low Tech. 'We are, as you say, held prisoner. We cannot descend, as that

would deliver us into the hands of our enemies; we cannot traverse the roof space as we would become prone to a cunningly placed stun cannon, and we cannot ascend as that way is barred by a dimensional wall that makes the building bigger on the inside than the outside. So if I might sum up as spokesperson for the prisoners' escape committee: WE'RE ***DOOMED,***

DOOMED,

DOOMED!'

and he burst into oily tears.

'It's not all that bad, 'Zool said, 'I've a feeling the cavalry is just around the corner.'

The Mayor just cried harder, which started the others off into a panic.

'Keep it down will you,' hissed Zool 'or you'll get us all killed!'

But it was too late. The noisy outburst had caught the attention of the soldiers. If they opened fire on the cage they'd all be in enormous trouble, but if he could draw their fire away, just long enough to give Zooz a chance to get there, then they just might get out of this alive. Zool flicked a switch on the side of his weapon and it hummed into life, the charger reading full. He punched a hole in the top of the cage and peeled it back to reveal the roof above. He jumped onto the lid of the cage and,

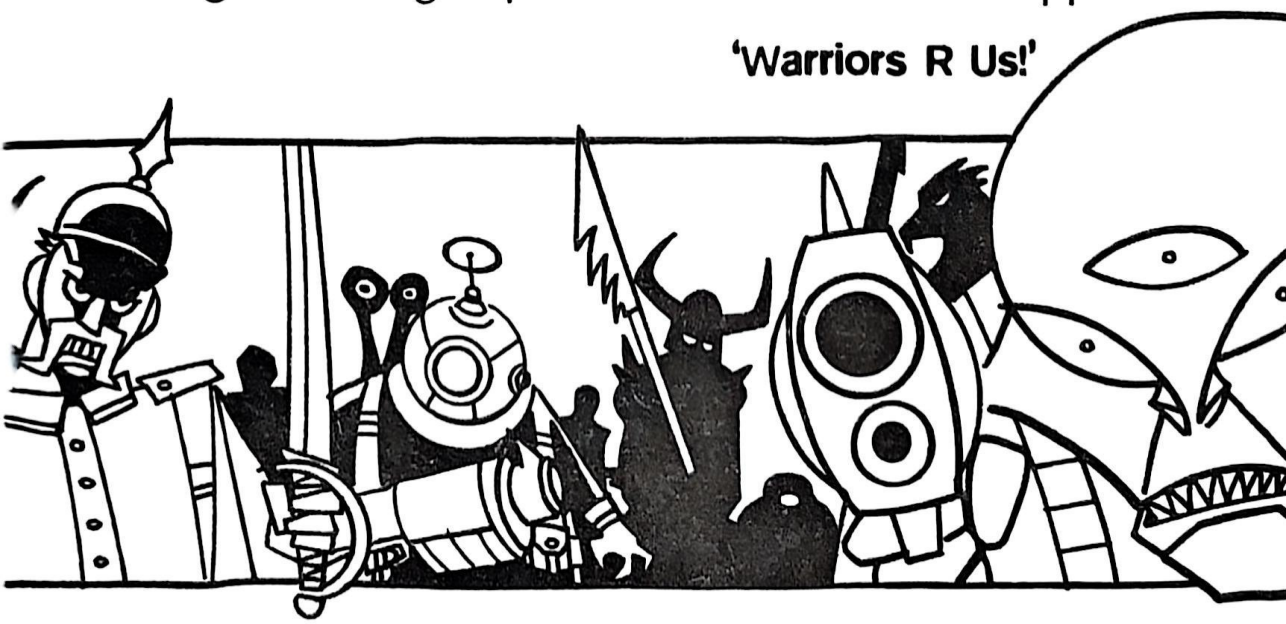
holding the gun in heroic pose 124, said, 'Rescue is on the way. When it gets here, don't hesitate.'

'Please be careful,' said George, 'you're the only friend I have.'

Something very strange came over Zool. He flicked a final look over his shoulder and said, 'Don't worry, kid, I'll be back.' And with that he was gone.

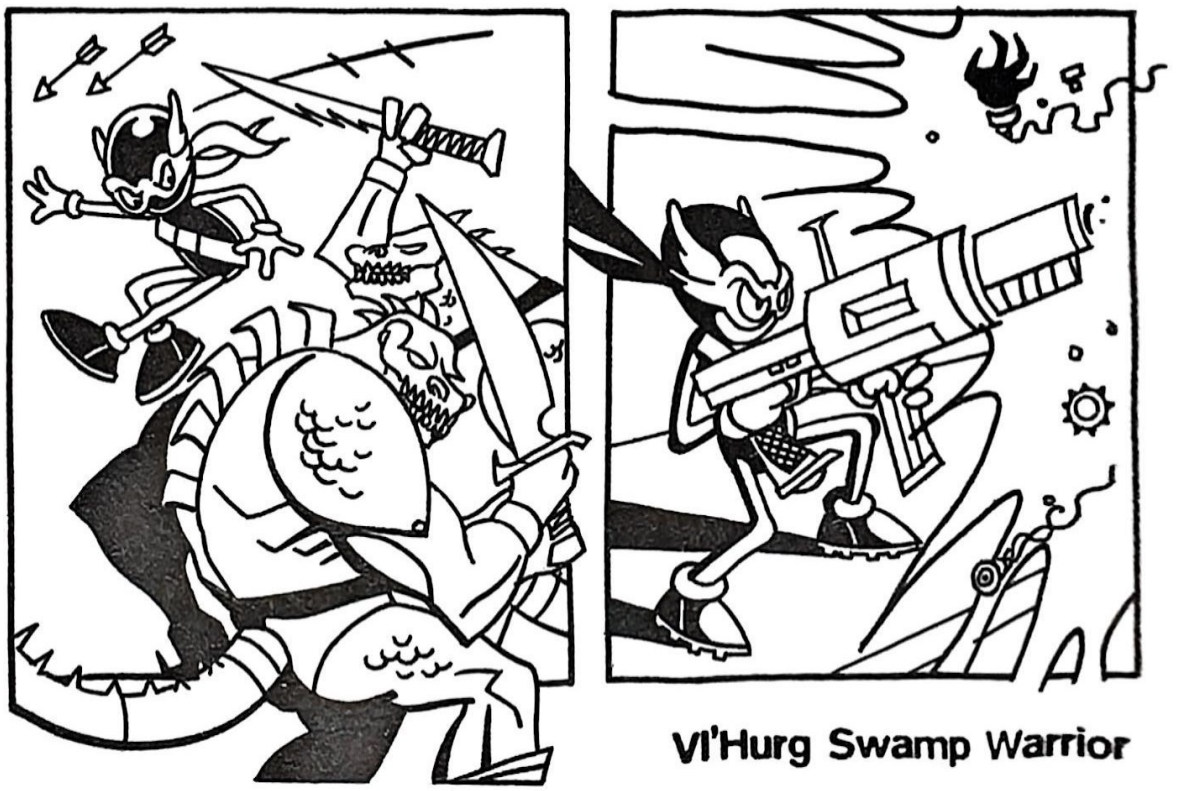
As he leapt from the top of the cage to a roof strut he opened fire on the masses of soldiers below. He aimed at a well stocked group of combat librarians and pulled the trigger. The gun bucked violently and spat a single bolt of angry red light; the soldiers dissolved in an instant, blue, yellow and gold lights dancing briefly on their molten remains.

Zool vaulted over a high strut as the massed forces of the biggest army in the **Nth Dimension** opened fire. Arrows, spears, bullets, flechetts, lasers, bolters, and countless other energy flares exploded around him and impacted on the roof, causing the whole building to shudder. He weaved and dodged, firing at close groups of soldiers when the opportu-



nity presented itself. He had to keep far enough away from the cage to make sure it didn't get hit by accident, whilst staying close enough to help when Zooz turned up. He hoped she'd got his mental distress call. Another volley of weapon-fire pierced the air around him and he very nearly bought the big one. It was only his super reaction and the lucky intervention of a well-placed strut that stopped him becoming Zool paté. They were getting too close!

Flipping the Maxiquat on to full auto, he plunged down and landed on the top of one of the shelves. Being lower down there'd be less soldiers able to shoot at him, but the ones who could shoot would get a better shot. It was a gamble, but that's what made life interesting to Zool. He jumped from shelf to shelf, firing on the soldiers and enjoying the satis-



Vl'Hurg Swamp Warrior

fying and attractive way they met their doom. The shelves exploded behind him as the soldiers tried to cut him down, cutting off his way back, forcing him ever onward.

Over the roar of the raging battle, Zool could just make out another vibration joining the strains of the building. He knew that the soldiers, not having his superior alien Ninja hearing, wouldn't detect it, and his instincts told him that Zooz was on the way. He started to circle back round, making his way directly under the cage where he had decided to make a stand. Fire blazed from his gun as he turned and twisted to avoid the hail of bullets. They were closing in, and it was getting harder and harder for Zool to avoid being hit. He'd already taken a couple minor wounds and a few more wounds like that would reduce his efficiency and then... The soldiers, realising that their weapons were not having the desired effect, began to climb the shelf on which Zool stood on, trampling and tearing each other in their eagerness to get at him.

Suddenly there was an explosion, and huge chunks of roof came crashing down, crushing the soldiers and sending the army into panic.

'Check-out time!'

He leapt straight up in to the air, but not before delivering a few ninja blows to a couple of the fastest climbers. Although he knew they were only robots, he thought he saw anger in their eyes as they realised they'd lost. As he climbed through the air he

aimed a single low energy pulse at the stun cannon on the bottom of the cage. It gave a satisfying fizz as it died and dropped off towards the waiting multitude below. Catching hold of one corner of the cage, he swung himself up onto the top of it, just in time to see the last of the clockwork men disappearing up a ladder into the belly of the **PURE THOUGHT**. Zooz was standing at the hatch.

'Hurry up!' she said urgently, 'that cage won't hold forever; they're firing into it.'

Zool leapt onto the ladder and started to climb up. 'Have you got George?'

Zooz was obviously confused. Zool jumped off the rescue ladder and dived straight back into the now partially molten cage. He emerged moments later with a yellow furry bundle under his arm, just before the cage exploded, showering Zool with molten metal. He shielded the duck with his body and climbed the rest of the way into the ship.

'Zoon, smart bomb **NOW**!'

Zoon pressed a button on his console and a large hatch opened up in the weapons' bay. A smart bomb came to the front and jumped out of the hatch.

'Get out of here *fast*,' Zool screamed.

As the ship pulled away from the gaping hole in the roof of Plooka's cottage, all hell was breaking loose below as the smart bomb did its worst.

* * *

The lounge in the Mayor's mansion was a comfortable and pleasant place. Light, open and warm, Zool, Zooz and Zoon felt comfortable for the first time in ages. Zooz dressed Zool's wounds and the Mayor arranged to have food and drink brought in for his guests. George, looking a bit singed around the edges, slept on Zool's lap.

The Mayor settled himself in an ample comfy chair and cleared his throat to get Zool's, Zooz's and Zoon's attention. Zool was absent-mindedly stroking George, Zooz was lost in her own thoughts and most of Zoon was lost in a huge bowl of chocolate trifle.

'Erm, if I might ask a question of you...' said the Mayor, trailing off a bit at the end.

'Sorry, what?' said Zool, looking up, his eyes still lost in the distance.

'As representative of the peoples of Low Tech I feel I can speak for everyone when I say that we would be greatly gratified if the status quo were restored post haste.'

Zool and Zooz looked blankly at each other, then back at the Mayor. The Mayor looked from one to the other.

'The functionality of the entire globe relies on the presents of a venerated people's cohort, and the absence is sorely felt.'

The Mayor looked expectantly at Zool and Zooz. Understanding began to creep across Zooz's face.

'He means he wants things to be the same as they were before. He wants the Plooka back.'

'Ah, precisely madam!' said the Mayor, beaming at them broadly.

'Well Mr Mayor, I think we may be able to help you. This little fellow,' said Zool, nodding towards George, 'comes from another planet in the Toys sector. It seems he was hungry and walked into a spacecraft where he smelled food. He was captured and taken here, where he was placed with the rest of the prisoners in the toy room at Plooka's place. This means that Mental Block has been on George's world of Briny Ablutions. It's the only lead we have I'm afraid.'

'And anyway,' said Zoon's head – the one that wasn't troughing, 'we've got to get George home.'

* * *

The ***PURE THOUGHT*** was heading at full speed into the Toys sector, deeper into the **Nth Dimension.** The whole team were feeling in good spirits after the send-off they'd got from Low Tech. They all knew the hopes of an entire world rested with them, and they weren't about to let them down. Zoon had punched up all the information they had on computer about Briny Ablutions because Zool said that they'd need every scrap of information. Zoon looked over at Zool and Zooz, who were deep in a heated conversation.

'I tell you it's insane to go in all guns blazing. We have no idea what we're up against!' Zooz's eyes flashed as she spoke.

Zool called over to Zoon. 'Have you got the data on George's planet yet.'

'It's here, but there isn't very much of it I'm afraid, just a brief outline of what the planet is like.'

'OK, let's have it then.' Zool looked at Zooz as if to say, 'Listen to this, it'll prove my point.'

Zoon activated a switch and an electronic brass band struck up a tune to accompany the text.

'Briny Ablutions' it said in an overly cheery, almost frantic voice, 'is a small world almost entirely without land. Small islands occasionally pop out of the oceans and float around for a while before sinking again without a trace. These short-lived islands are used as breeding grounds for some of the life forms that exist on the world – ducks and towels to name but two, and as landing points for the sponge hunters to load their booty onto spacecraft to be taken off world.

'The planet is reputably the home of a mythical creature called the Yellow Shark, who is supposed to be the last of his kind in the universe. The sponge hunters have occasionally reported spotting this fabulous creature, but there is no proof as to its existence.

'The water of the world contains traces of nickel, manganese and...'

'Thanks computer,' said Zool, 'See what I mean, almost entirely water.'

'I've got a lot more information,' said the computer 'like gravity data, air densities, weather patterns, air speed velocities of unladen swallows...'

'Thanks,' said Zool more forcefully, 'that will be all.'

'Please yourself, I'm only trying to help,' mumbled the computer, and went off into a corner to sulk.

'What has no land got to do with going in like a bionic hedgehog looking for a car?' asked Zooz.

'Whatever's going on there, Mental Block has already had a head start on us. I get the feeling we're running last in a race, only I don't know where we're running to or what prize the winner gets. Look, no land means no cover, so whatever he's up to has either got to be under the water, in which case he won't see us turning up over the planet, or on the water, so if we power dive the place we have a much better chance of surprising him.'

Zooz wasn't convinced and Zool could see it written all over her face.

'It's my instincts,' said Zool earnestly, 'they say that it's time that's important, not being careful. Sometimes you have to plan an offensive carefully, taking all the variable factors into consideration, making counterplans and contingency arrangements – and other times you just have to hit 'em as hard as a titanium wrecking ball. This is one of those times.'

'I'm not convinced,' said Zooz, 'but I'll go along with it. We go in hard though, no half measures. Full shields, missiles, all cannons and even smart bombs at the ready, OK?'

'Sure!' Zool said, beaming a huge grin, 'Trust me, I know what I'm doing.'

* * *

Once they reached the planet it was pretty obvious to everyone concerned that something serious was happening down on the surface. Even from space they could see the explosive flares and flash of high energy beams, centred on a very small part of the planet. There seemed to be an island under attack.

'Battle stations everyone,' ordered Zool. Zooz manned the weapons' control while Zoon moved from navigation and communications to tactics. 'Combat computer, give me a tactical.'

'Yes **SIR!**' barked the combat computer.

A three dimensional holographic image appeared on the main viewing screen. It showed a small island, less than a kilometre wide at its broadest, narrowing to almost a point at the far end. It looked rocky, inhospitable, totally devoid of life and was the colour of bleached bone. Zoon thought it looked like a cheese triangle. Arranged all around the image of the island were red dots, and trajectory lines from the dots to the island showed where the attacks were hitting.

'What are they playing at?' said Zool, more to himself than to anyone in particular.

'It doesn't make any sense,' said Zooz, 'why attack an empty island?'

Zoon looked up from tactics. 'The computer says that they are organised for bombardment, and they're attempting to weaken the enemy. Though personally,' said Zoon's other half, 'I just think he's letting off some steam.'

'Senile silicon gadget,' scoffed Zool 'there's nothing there to bombard. I don't really care at the moment why he's doing it, I just know he's up to something and we're the ones who are going to put a stop to his evil activities... whatever they are.

'There's something on that island,' said Zool fingering his power blaster, 'and Mental Block wants it, and if he wants it, I want to stop him getting his claws on it twice as bad. I have a cunning plan – prepare for attack!'

* * *

The ***PURE THOUGHT***, piloted now by Zoon, made a power dive towards the open sea, a little distance from the battle zone. All weapons were armed and on automatic. Zool and Zooz waited with their anti-grav parachutes by the open belly hatch. Zoon pulled the ship out of its dive inches from the surface of the water. The supersonic boom caused by the enormous speed of the deadly ship whipped up the sea and filled the belly hatch with fine spray, soaking Zool and Zooz. Zool looked down and watched the water speed past. He wondered how Mental Block was going to attack the area.

Mental Block always attacked in a way that suited the environment. On Fast Food world he made suffocating pizza monsters and burgers that bit back; on Music world it was CDs that could sever limbs and Death Metal to melt his enemies' brains.

Here he was using large toy boats which fired real shells that exploded on impact with the island; 100 metre long loofers as landing craft filled with toy sailors dressed as pirates riding enormous, chainsaw-toothed ducks and flying flannels which dropped bath bombs on the island as they sped past.

'Thirty second's to attack,' said Zoon's voice over the intercom. Zoon had locked on to two of the battle boats with Motorhead missiles, while the cannons, bolters, blasters and lasers were on full auto fire. Zool counted down in his head. Three – two – one – brace... Zool felt the missiles launch and a moment later the ship climbed steeply. Zool leaned right out of the hatch just in time to see the missiles hit. Both boats in their path exploded almost simultaneously, blown completely out of the water. Their way was now clear. As the ship flew over the island Zool and Zooz jumped.

Zool's plan was simple. Zoon would pilot the ***PURE THOUGHT*** and clear a path through the enemy to allow Zool and Zooz to drop onto the island. Zoon would then carry on the attack of the bigger craft while Zool and Zooz investigated the island and carried out a ground offensive. Zoon's missile shots meant that there was now no one in the immediate area who could shoot at Zool and Zooz while they were at their most vulnerable, on the drop down.

Zoon banked the ship sharply away to carry on the attack. Meanwhile, Zool and Zooz floated (all

too slowly, Zool thought) towards the vicious, jagged peaks that made up their landing area. They didn't know it, but they were heading directly towards one of Mental Block's advance landing parties who were making their way deep into the interior of the island, and were hidden between the walls of a deep canyon. As they drifted lower, wafted gently inland by a sea breeze, Zool and Zooz finally noticed what it was they were heading for. Now, with only seconds left before they landed almost directly in front of the force, they had to decide if they were going to do battle and risk getting involved in a long and dangerous fight, or were they going to try to evade the fifty or so heavily armed soldiers and hundreds of giant yellow ducks with chainsaw mouths, in order to investigate the island.

As it turned out the decision was made for them. One of the soldiers – Zool didn't know which one it was as they had all been identically dressed by Mental Block in cute blue-and-white sailors uniforms – had seen them and cried out a warning to his commander, a rather swarthy and battered Battlebot from the Cube wars of Fridgia. Just before they dropped below the lip of the canyon, Zool and Zooz saw the force surge forward to meet them.

'Great welcoming committee,' said Zooz, 'think there'll be a red carpet?'

'It would clash with their uniforms,' said Zool, powering up his weapons.

They landed with a jolt and saw, only metres away, that the force had stopped dead, blocking their path. Zool and Zooz turned to make a break for it in the opposite direction, only to discover, once rounding a bend, that it was a dead end, the smooth canyon wall stretching up almost as far as they could see. The canyon that was originally going to provide them with cover, had turned out to be a very effective trap.

They heard a shout from further up the canyon.

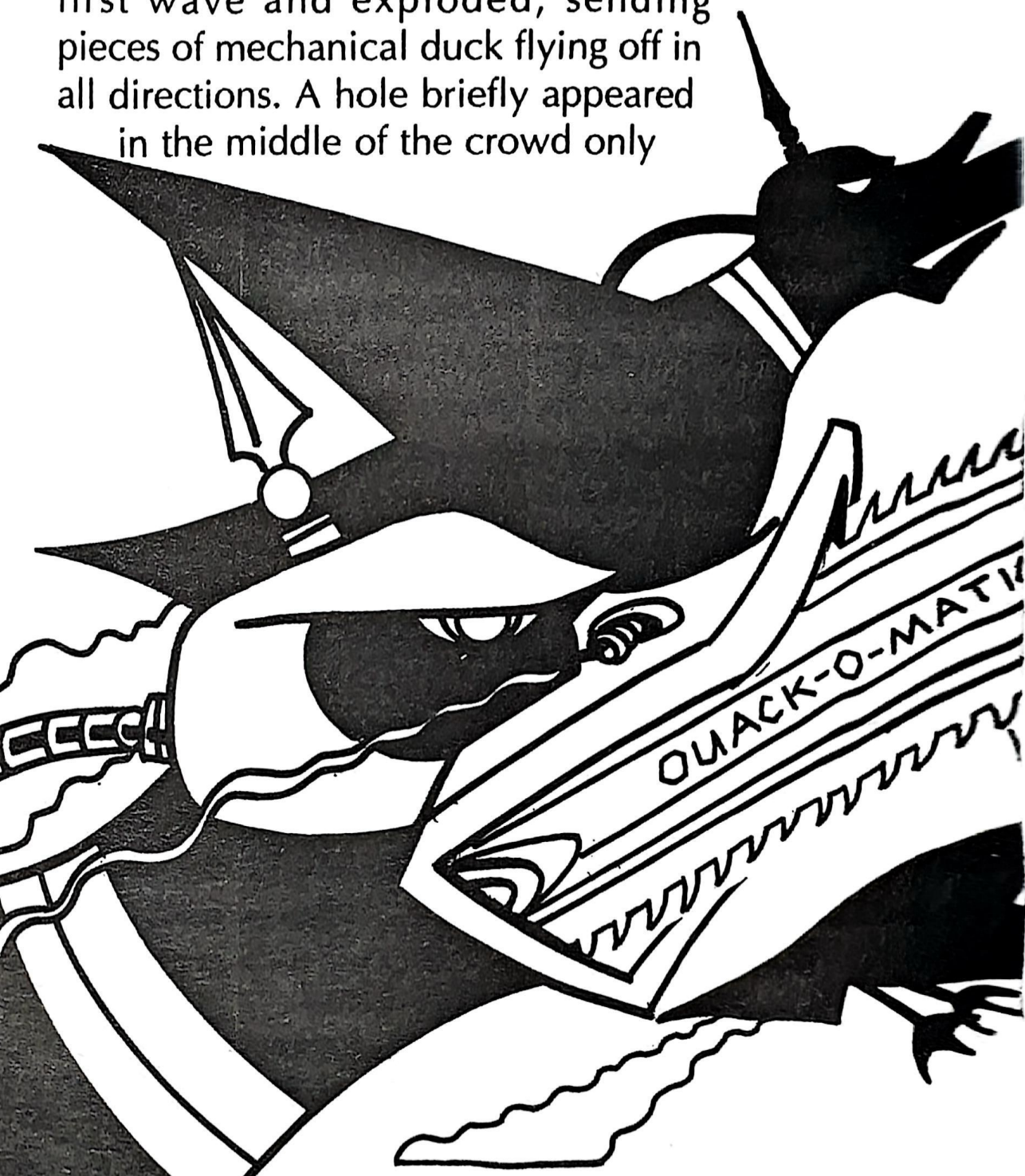
'Cry havoc and let loose the ducks of war!' came the command.

Zool heard the sound of hundreds of chainsaws like the angry buzz of a million bees and felt the ground begin to tremble beneath his feet. The walls of the canyon echoed with the thunder of what sounded like a stampede. Zool thought furiously. He could send a mental distress call, but Zoon could never get there in time. They could try and climb the walls to escape the killer ducks, but then they'd be sitting ducks themselves for Mental Block's soldiers. There was nothing left to do now but fight. They turned to look at each other in a moment of unspoken understanding. They'd fight to the last and die together if they had to.

Funny, thought Zool, *I never thought it'd end this way*. And hand in hand, Zool and Zooz charged to meet their destiny.

* * *

The ducks filled the whole width of the canyon, their chainsaw bills occasionally sparking against the hard rock walls. Zool aimed a grenade and with only metres to spare threw with all his might right into the midst of the oncoming horde of yellow death. The grenade disappeared in the middle of the first wave and exploded, sending pieces of mechanical duck flying off in all directions. A hole briefly appeared in the middle of the crowd only



to be filled almost immediately by the wave behind. Zool drew his power blades, ready to engage in hand to hand combat when he suddenly noticed, that where the grenade had landed, there was a disturbance in the flow of the oncoming enemy. He had only a second to decide, and he decided to take a gamble, as he liked them. Either way, he thought, it was certain death. To Zooz's amazement he dropped his power blades, grabbed her around the waist and jumped into the middle of the mass of the oncoming pack. They sailed through the air and Zooz felt like they were in slow motion. She couldn't believe what he'd just done. They didn't have a hope. As the ground and the waiting jaws of the killer quackers came up to meet them she closed her eyes and waited for oblivion... which never came. Instead of hitting the ground, they passed in to it. They fell, twisting and turning as they banged on the sharp walls of the shaft they were in. They landed with a sharp thud on a small pile of rubble which had at one time been the roof of the passage. The grenade had opened up a fissure in the rock to an underground cavern. Zool had noticed it when he saw how the ducks stumbled over the spot where the grenade had exploded. Of course, it might only have been a crater, but the gamble had paid off. The hole was too small for the ducks to fit down, but once the soldiers

'Hey isnt' that little Miss Muffet...?'

discovered it, it wouldn't be long before they blasted a bigger hole.

Apart from being covered in cuts and bruises they were OK. They looked around. They were in the back of a small, oblong cavern, only a few metres high and perhaps fifty metres long. The walls were covered in a lichen that glowed very faintly. The scene would have been eerie enough, without all the eyes staring at them from within the gloom.

'Seize the intruders!' hissed a voice like nails being dragged across a blackboard.

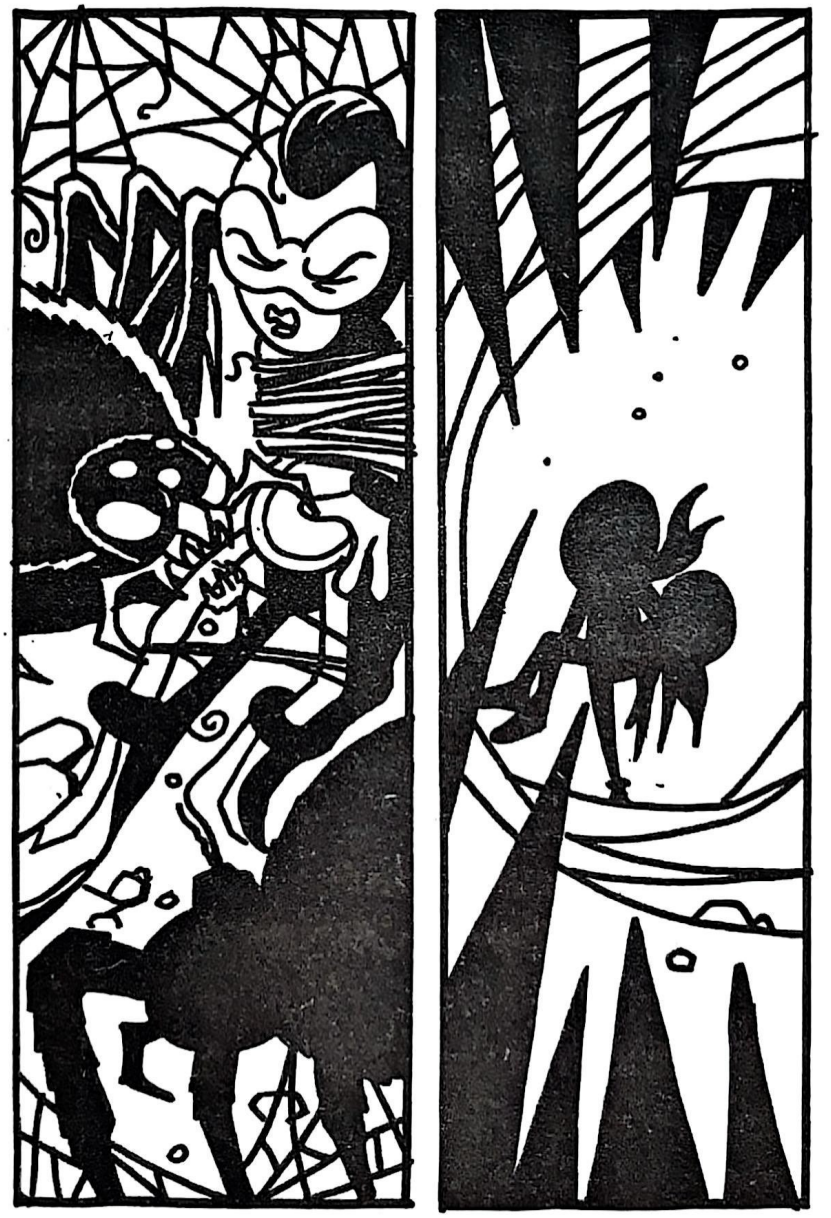
Out of the shadows scurried several bloated, hairy, many eyed spiders, their long fangs dripping disgusting green slime. Zool groaned.

'No wait, you don't understand. We're here to help you!' But no matter what Zool said the spiders kept on advancing until Zool and Zooz were backed up into the corner, on top of the rubble where they'd landed. Zool didn't want to fight them, he understood that they thought he was one of the invaders. He'd just have to make them understand.

'We surrender,' said Zool, and put up his hands to show he was unarmed. Zooz followed suit. The spiders were very big indeed, and reached up past Zool's waist. Two spiders approached Zool and Zooz, and started to bind their hands with webbing.

Zool hoped that he'd be taken before a leader who'd be more open to talking. Suddenly there was a blinding flash, followed by a roar and a squeal as one of the spiders binding Zooz exploded. The soldiers had found the hole quicker than Zool had expected and had fired blindly, killing one of the guards.

The spider attack came fast and without mercy. The other spiders grabbed at the cosmic pair and



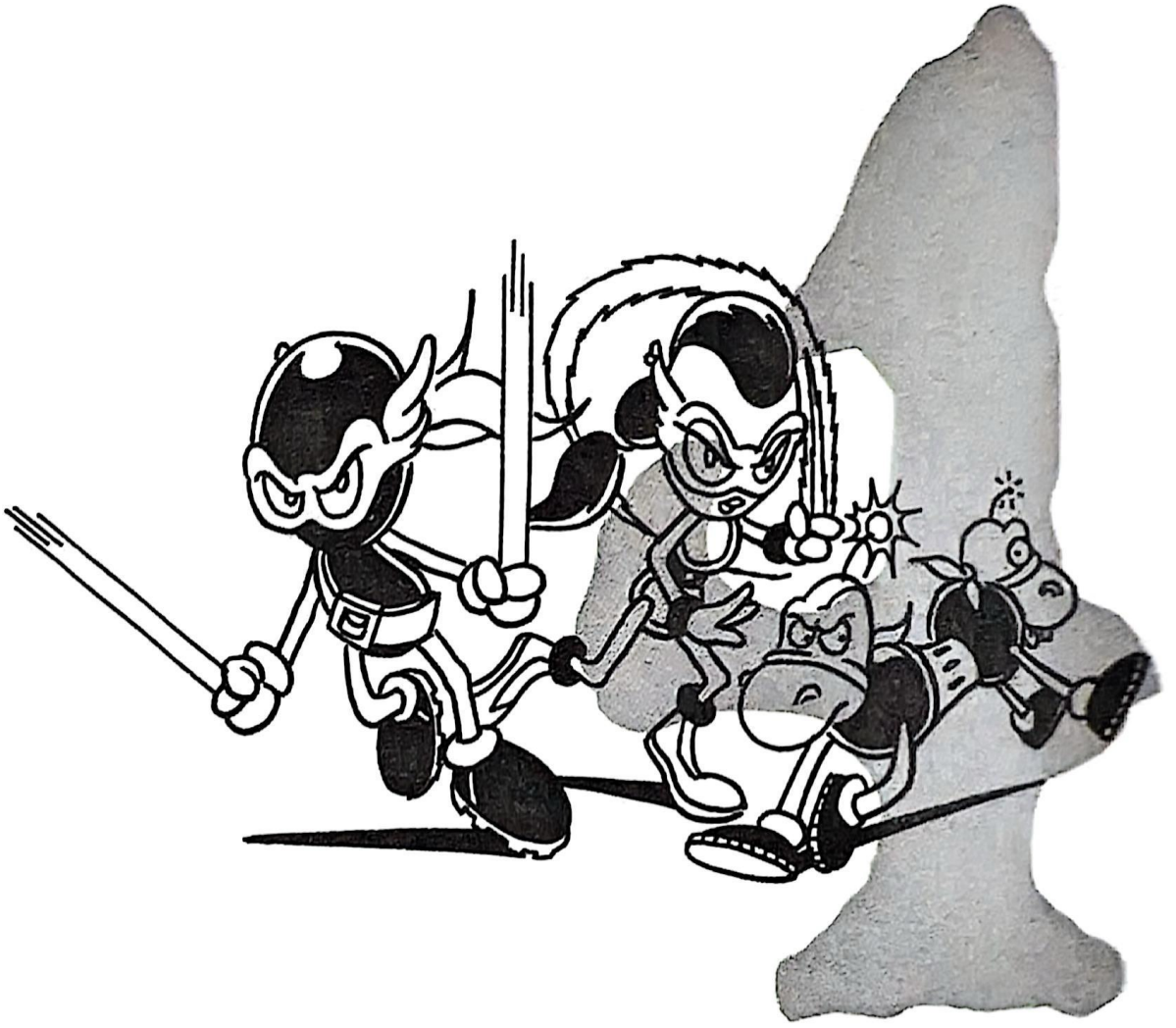
started to drag them away from under the shaft, binding them up in sticky foul-smelling webbing as they went. Without warning Zooz screamed and Zool saw her go limp. One of the spiders had sunk his poisonous fangs deep into her leg. Zool was horrified and fought down his rage at what the spiders had done. He sent out a massive mental distress call to Zoon. The spiders must have been telepathically sensitive for his mental shout acted like a siren, causing them to squeak and wail in panic, pain and confusion. Zool easily broke free of his bonds and grabbed Zooz's now unconscious body, and ran deeper into the underground caverns in search of safety.

* * *

Zool wandered the spiders' caverns for hours with the near lifeless body of Zooz, desperately trying to find a way out to the surface so he could get her to the ship and the medical facilities that it possessed. She was getting visibly weaker every moment, coughing and shaking uncontrollably. He'd applied a field dressing after sucking out as much of the deadly venom as he could, but he just didn't know whether he'd sucked enough. He could hear the sound of fighting going on all around, but his only thoughts were for Zooz.

Eventually he came across a wider, smoother passageway that seemed to slope upwards and he

walked up it, towards a faint red light. He was hoping to find the surface but instead came out in a great vaulted cavern. The light came from hundreds of fist-sized crystals that the Plooka's toy soldiers were busy taking down and placing in sacks that were carried away by still more soldiers. The spiders had been defeated and those who survived cowered in the corners. So this was what they'd come for, but what were they? Zool had no time to think about it at the moment, he had to get out of there with as little fuss as possible. His only chance was to sneak out. He spotted a soldier with a sack, standing alone not far from him. Zooz shivered involuntarily as he placed her gently in a hollow in the ground. He crept up quietly behind the soldier and delivered a silent knock-out blow, catching the soldier before he touched the ground. He quickly dragged him into the darkness and removed his uniform, donning it himself. He took the sack, removing all but one of the crystals, and placed Zooz in it instead. He took a deep breath and joined the ranks of soldiers carrying the sacks to the surface. Luckily none of them took much notice of him as they were too busy loading the crystals into carriers to take to a waiting spaceship, and he was able to reach the surface without incident. As soon as he had a chance he broke away from the crowd and started climbing, making for the highest point on the island, calling to Zoon. All that mattered now was saving Zooz's life.



TREATMENT IN TERROR

They were lucky to get away from the planet in one piece. Zoon had had to bring the ship in really close to the island, leaving himself vulnerable to attack from Mental Block's forces, in order to allow Zool to get on board, and then dodge the shells from the few ships left after the ***PURE THOUGHT***'s attack in order to clear the atmosphere.

Zooz lay on the treatment couch, connected up to a quick diagnostic machine. She was so pale she was almost transparent; her breathing was shallow and laboured and every once in a while she'd twitch and buck against the blanket that covered her. Zool could feel her slipping away. He paced the floor waiting for the diagnostic computer to work out what was wrong with her and to figure a treatment. He knew it was only a matter of time.

'No treatment available,' came the impassive voice of the medical computer.

Zool was crushed. Never in his worst nightmares had he ever considered that he'd loose Zooz – ever! And now he was going to be forced to watch her die slowly, and in agony. It was too much.

'Can you at least stop the pain she's in?' asked Zool.

'Affirmative,' said the computer, and injected her with a powerful pain killer that at least meant that she'd sleep. Zool sat by her side, held her hand and cried.

'Hello,' said a familiar little voice by Zool's foot, 'what's wrong?'

Zool looked down. In all the confusion he'd forgotten to put George back on his own planet. He deserved an explanation at least, thought Zool. He picked George up and took him into the briefing room.

'Zooz is sick,' said Zool, 'very sick and she may die. Our computer says that she can't be treated so

there is nothing for us to do and I'm sad because I love Zooz very much and I don't want her to go away.'

'Is your computer broken?' asked George.

'No, it just doesn't know what to do,' said Zool.

'Well, can't you find a cleverer computer?' said George.

'There are no cleverer computers...' began Zool, and stopped. There weren't any on the ship or even on any of the worlds nearby, but there just might be somewhere else. Zool rushed to navigation and frantically searched through old maps until he found what he'd been looking for.

'Zoon, set a course bearing 212.44 by 988.7 by 2112, ludicrous speed.' He dashed back to Zooz and held her hand.

'Don't worry Princess,' he whispered, 'I'll make it right.'

* * *

The ***PURE THOUGHT*** was the most advanced ship in the Dimension, but it hadn't always been. Many, many years before, the **Nth Dimension** had weathered terrible wars with the forces of Krool. The technology of destruction was at its most advanced stage, and as the power to destroy grew, so did the need to heal. Around the planets of Krax and Kutz orbited an ancient space station that housed the most advanced medical facilities. It was abandoned

now as it wasn't really needed, but Zool figured it was Zooz's only chance. At maximum speed they would be there in no time.

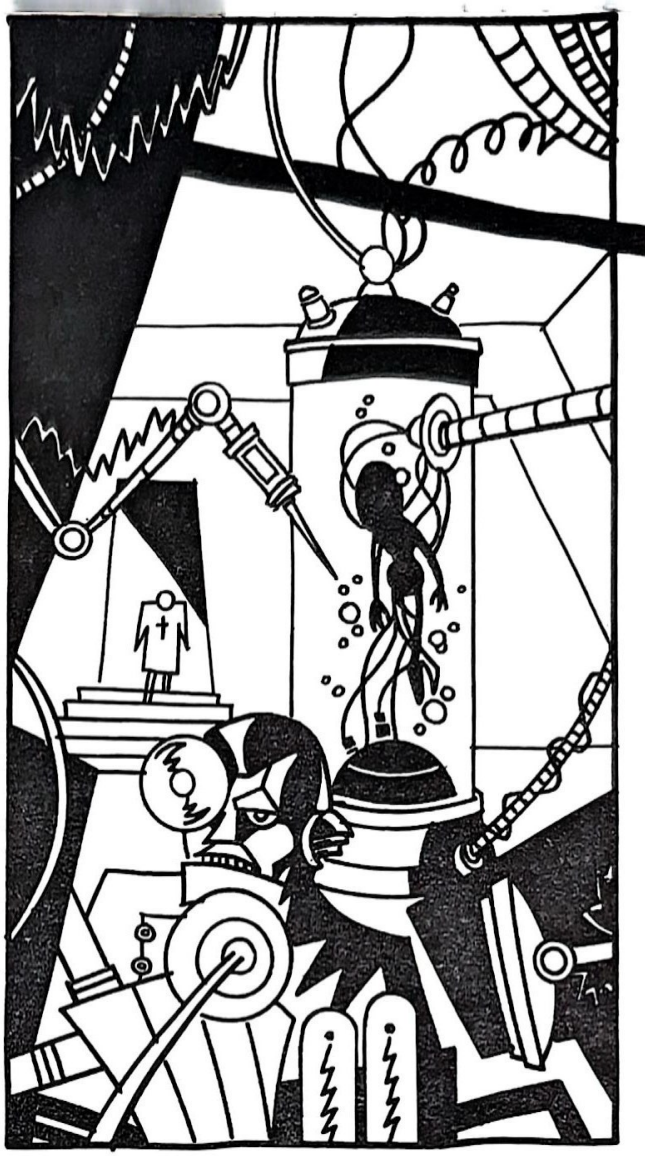
As they approached the space station Zool got Zooz ready for the transfer. He moved her on to a stretcher and loaded it on a carrier. He looked out of one of the side ports and caught a glimpse of the planets Krax and Kutz. They were a reminder of the futility of war. Both planets were lifeless lumps of rock spinning in space, made barren by a long forgotten conflict that had no meaning now. As the ***PURE THOUGHT*** turned for final approach, Zool saw the space station. It was a massive cylinder hanging impossibly above the planets. It was grey and lifeless, but at least it looked like it was in one piece. Zool checked on Zooz. She was hardly breathing at all, her breaths coming in shallow gasps. Even the pain killers weren't having an effect now. Zool knew that every second counted. The space station was probably mostly automated, figured Zool, so he had to get it up and running before they docked. He sent a powerful distress signal to the station. Even though the station had been de-activated for hundreds of years it was still in perfect working order, much to Zool's relief. As soon as it received the distress signal a miraculous change came over the station. Ancient computers, which had been asleep for many years, woke at the call for help and set about readying the station for casualties. Reactors powered up and the whole station

burst into life, its thousands of tiny lights making it look like an ice crystal as it glinted in the sun.

By the time the ship docked with a metallic clang the station was fully operational. Zool was already waiting with Zooz at the airlock, a disk full of diagnostic information in his hand ready to pass on to the robodocs. He looked down at Zooz. She wasn't even moving any more. The iris valve door began to open, but Zool couldn't wait. He forced it open with his bare hands and pushed the carrier, with Zooz's lifeless body on it, through.

The docs were waiting. They took the diagnostic disk and ran down the corridors towards the poison treatment deck with Zooz on the stretcher. As they ran, their many hands moved quickly and efficiently over Zooz's body, connecting machines to help her breath, as well as to monitor her vital signs. Zool stayed a healthy distance behind as he didn't want to get in the way of the experts, but he didn't want to be too far away from her either.

He followed them into the poison treatment room and watched as they placed her in a regeneration tank. She floated in the healing liquids, the many pipes and wires coming out of her body making her look like she'd been tangled up in seaweed. She looked like she was dead, drowned in the murky waters of the tank. Zool stood in the corner and all he could do was watch. For all his Ninja abilities and cosmic magic there was nothing he could do for her now but hope.



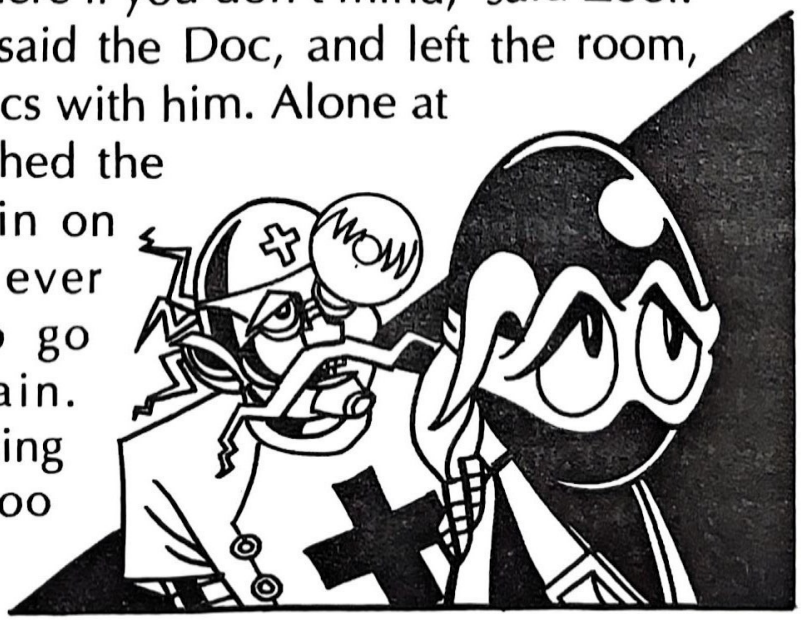
'The poison had almost destroyed her,' said a friendly voice beside Zool, 'but the regeneration tank will take care of her. Don't worry, she'll be fine,' and a reassuring hand rested gently on Zool's shoulder.

The voice came from the robodoc who had taken the diagnostic disk from Zool when they'd first boarded.

'There's nothing you can do now, why don't you go and sit in the lounge area?'

'I'd rather stay here if you don't mind,' said Zool.

'As you wish,' said the Doc, and left the room, taking the other Docs with him. Alone at last, Zool approached the tank and looked in on Zooz. He didn't ever want to have to go through that again. The thought of losing her was almost too

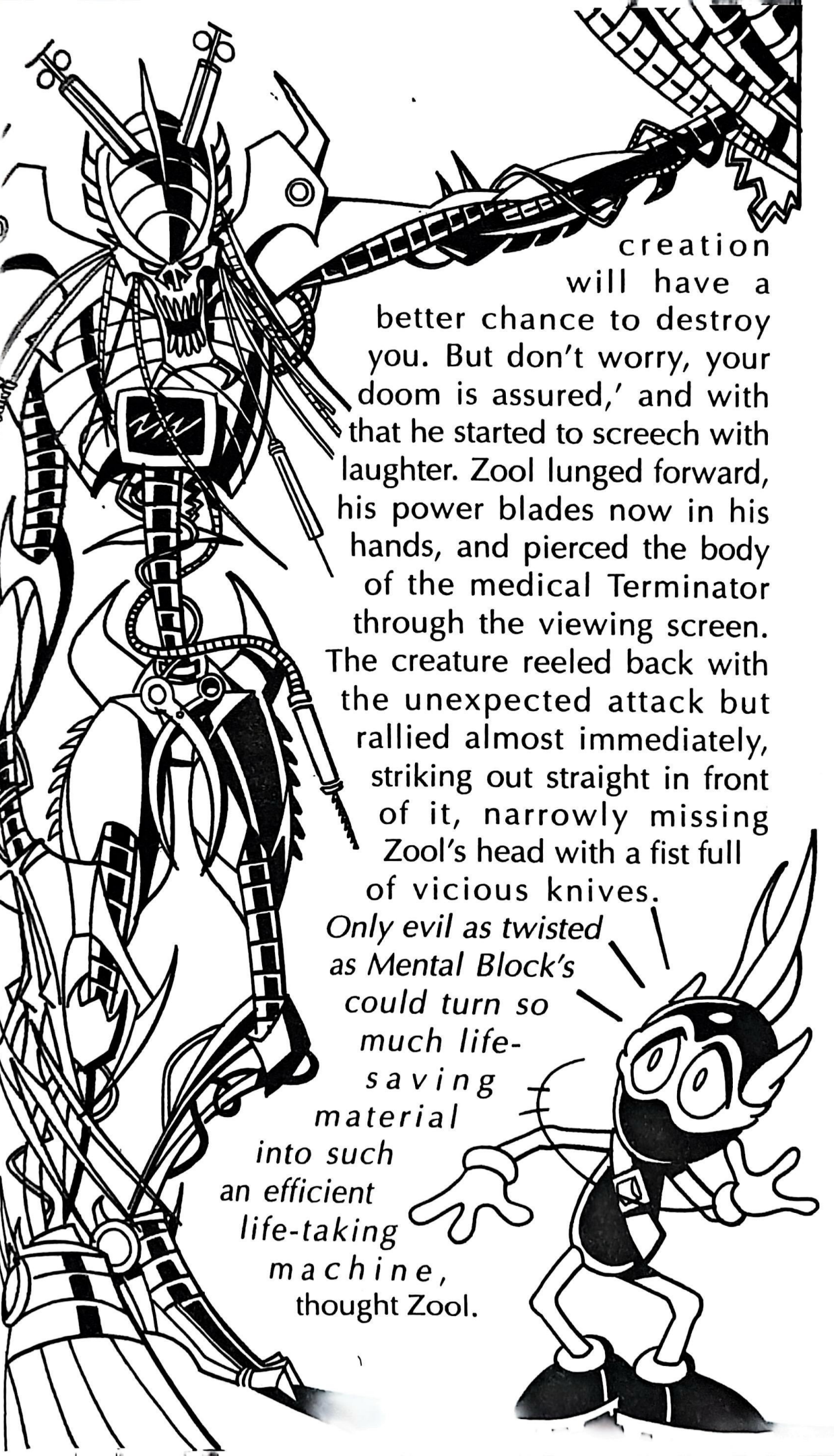


much to bear. As he stared at her beautiful face he saw a flicker of life flash across it and her eyes slowly opened. She looked at him and smiled a weak but sure smile. There was no need for words: they knew how they felt about each other.

As Zool looked at her he saw a horrible change take place. The loving expression was replaced by wide-eyed terror and she opened her mouth as if to scream. Zool knew there was something behind him and he almost dreaded to turn round. In the reflective glass of the regeneration tank he caught a glimpse of something very large and metal looming above him. He span on the spot, making sure that he was between the tank and the unknown it. When he looked at it he knew why she'd screamed. Towering above him was a pulsating metal skyscraper of medical appliances that made the Terminator look like a toy puppy. This was definitely Mental Block's handywork.

The creature just stood there looking at him, swaying from one side to the other, its shiny serrated metal arms and scalpel fingers twitching with the anticipation of the pending battle. Zool couldn't understand why it was waiting, until a small viewing screen in the monster's chest flickered into life and the face of the Mental Block appeared, a loathsome grin across his evil face.

'So one or more of you have been poisoned – good!' said Mental Block, bouncing up and down with spiteful glee. 'With princess down, my little



creation will have a better chance to destroy you. But don't worry, your doom is assured,' and with that he started to screech with laughter. Zool lunged forward, his power blades now in his hands, and pierced the body of the medical Terminator through the viewing screen. The creature reeled back with the unexpected attack but rallied almost immediately, striking out straight in front of it, narrowly missing Zool's head with a fist full of vicious knives.

Only evil as twisted as Mental Block's could turn so much life-saving material into such an efficient life-taking machine, thought Zool.

Zool had to keep this monster away from the regeneration tank. The creature was three times his height, almost touching the ceiling, and Zool thought he could use this to his advantage. He jumped straight up in the air and crossed both blades in front of him to block against the slicing downward cut of the creature's arms. Using the momentum of the blow he pivoted on his blades and swung forward towards the creature's middle. He had to disarm the thing quickly. The size this monster was there was no way he could stop it from destroying the whole treatment room and Zooz along with it.

Instead of delivering a kick, as the creature thought he would, Zool dropped to the floor and scuttled between its legs, snapping his back straight as he did, so that he landed square on his feet behind the creature with his back to it. He stabbed behind him, into the crature's power pack located in the small of his back, driving the power blade deep in. Mental Block's monster screamed with pain and rage, thrashing wildly. Zool heard the sound of glass shatter and immediately thought of Zooz. There was no liquid so the creature must have broken something other than the regeneration tank. Zool had to finish this quickly. Using the embedded power blade like a springboard, he flicked up and landed across the monster's shoulders. His idea had been to disconnect the head before it knew what was going on, but this thing was smart. As soon as Zool had

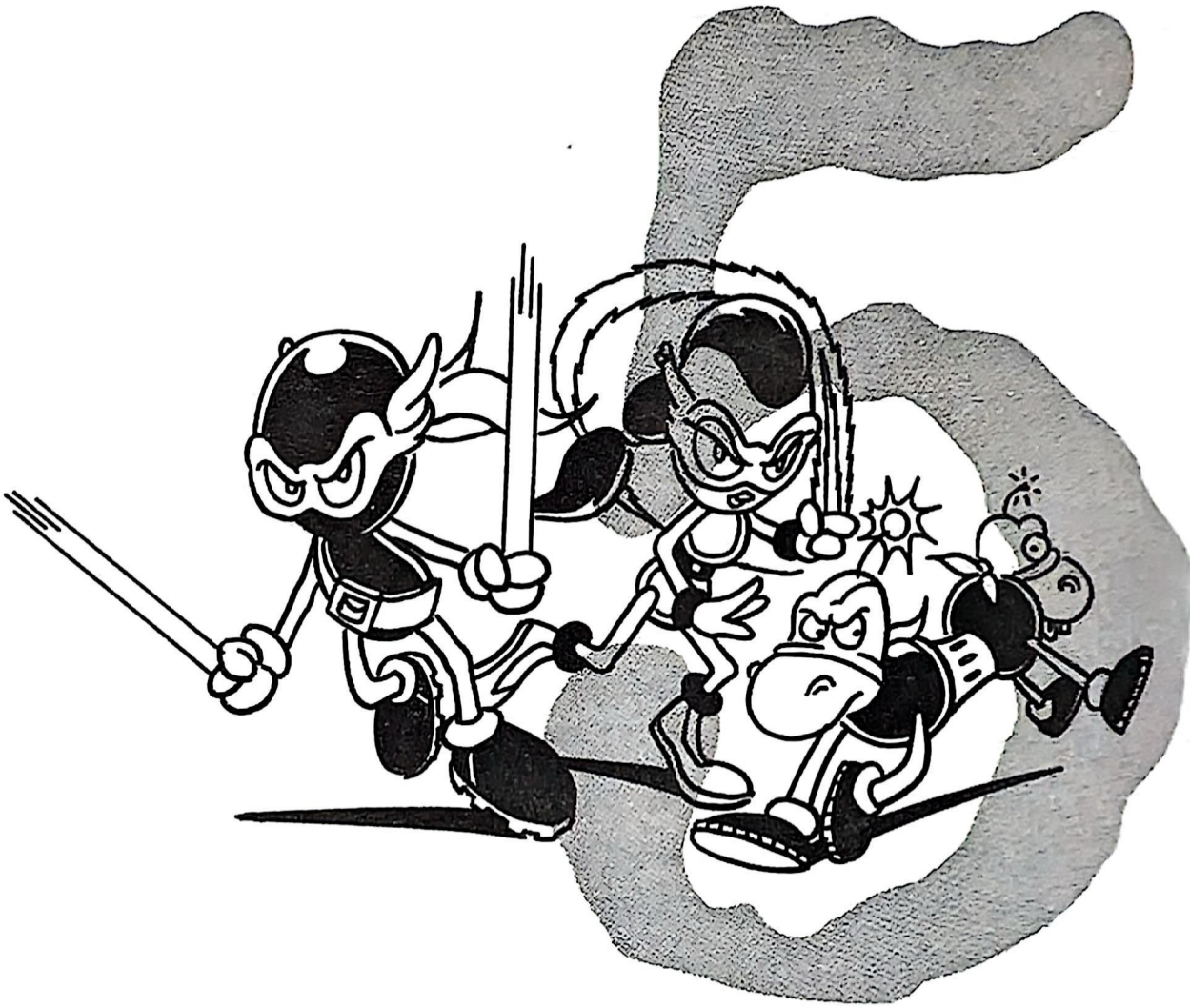
landed on its shoulders, it jumped straight up, forcing its head, and most of Zool's body, through the plasti-steel that made up the superstructure of the space station. The metal skeleton wasn't affected, but Zool was stunned by the impact and dropped, dazed, to the floor. Zool was lying prone on his back, and the creature wasn't about to miss an opportunity. It twisted on its pelvis, raised its arm and drove a fist down towards Zool's head with enough force to crack a truck in half.

'Hello,' said a little voice, 'what are you up to then?'

The sight of George standing on his foot and asking it so direct a question caused the monster a moment of slight confusion, but a moment was all Zool needed. He moved slightly to one side, avoiding the killing blow, which buried the arm of the monster up to its elbow and left its head almost level with Zool's.

'I don't suppose we could talk about this.' said the creature, but Zool wasn't in the mood for idle banter. He took his remaining power blade and buried it deep in the creature's head, causing it to thrash about wildly before its brain fused in a spectacluar shower of coloured sparks. George had already made good his escape, and was standing by the regeneration tank.

'That,' said Zool, standing over the body of his enemy, 'was far too close for comfort! Cheers George.'



THE CENTRAL SCRUTINIZER

It was a week before Zooz was strong enough to leave the station. There was no hurry though, as they were now at a dead end, not knowing where Mental Block was and still with no clue as to what he was actually up to. Zool had spent the week going over and over the information they had, running it through the computer, making flow diagrams, charts

and even resorting to writing words on bits of paper and pulling them at random out of a bag, but the best he'd managed to come up with was *Watch Out Where The Huskies Go And Don't You Eat The Yellow Snow*. Good advice, thought Zool, but not much use.

Zool and Zoon collected Zooz and, once they'd said their goodbyes, boarded the ***PURE THOUGHT***. After a brief check of systems they set off into deep space.

'We really have no choice, ' Zooz had said one afternoon, after they'd been travelling without much direction for a few days, 'if we want to find out what Mental Block's up to we have to go and ask You-Know-Who.'

'But I hate having to see him, he never makes any sense. He's just some half crazed old space hermit who's managed to get the reputation for being some sort of great mystic. OK, so once or twice he's managed to give us some vital clue, but that was insane insight more than genuine cleverness.' Zool had pleading in his eyes as he talked to Zooz. 'Do we really have to see the Central Scrutinizer?'

'Yes!' said Zooz firmly. 'Zoon, plot us a course for the Nimrod Asteroid Field.'

* * *

The Central Scrutinizer wandered the **Nth Dimension** eternally. He never settled in one place

for more than a few days, preferring to stay on his floating asteroid in his small but cosy garage, sitting on his large red sofa and playing his guitar. No one knew where he originally had come from, but it was rumoured that he wasn't actually from the **Nth Dimension** at all, but was from the mundane world of people, and that somehow he'd managed to find a way in. Nobody really believed that though.

It took them some time to find, but eventually the ***PURE THOUGHT*** hovered mere metres above the roof of a small garage made from concrete that perched precariously on a very small asteroid deep in the heart of the Nimrod Asteroid Field. A large red sign above the door read 'Joe's Garage'. Zool, Zooz and Zoon climbed down the ladder to the ground and stood outside the closed door. Zool knew how Zooz felt about this Central Scrutinizer, but he just couldn't believe that this guy was anything special. He was just some burnt-out space hippy but Zool had to go along with all this because Zooz thought it was important. He'd go along with it for Zooz's sake. Zool felt a bit silly but he knocked on the door anyway. Zool thought it sounded like a funeral bell. Zooz felt a tingle up her spine at the sound, recalling other trips she'd made to this holy place. Zoon thought it sounded like a dinner gong.

The door of the garage slowly swung open and Zool and the gang were bathed in an eerie blue glow. As their eyes became accustomed to the light, they could make out, in silhouette, the shape of a

sofa, and sitting cross-legged in the middle of it was a tall, thin old man with a shock of grey-streaked black hair and a wild unkempt beard. He was clutching a lead-filled snow shoe tightly to his chest and eyeing them suspiciously through his bushy eyebrows.

The Central Scrutinizer spoke in a harsh whisper, his eyes darting this way and that, never really looking at anything or anyone.

'We seek your wisdom, Central Scurtinizer.' said Zooz reverently.

'It is written, on whatever it is that they write it on up there, that if anything bad ever happens to you as a result of some sort of conflict with anyone named Block, the only way you can get it fixed up is

by trudging across the tundra, mile after mile, trudging across the tundra... to the parish of Saint Alfonzo.'

'What is he on about?' whispered Zool into Zooz's ear.

'Shush!' said Zooz, 'he's going to say something else.'

'Remember, you are what you is; you ain't what you're not; you is what you am; a cow don't make ham. A foolish man, of a middle class family, started singing the blues, 'cause he thought it was manly, now he talk like a Thing-Fish (SayHow), and he look like a Mammy.... Mama ooh mama hey... now he talk like a Thing Fish ... (Say HA!)... and he look like a Mammy...' He suddenly jumped out of his seat and grabbed a doll dressed in a nurse's uniform, except it had a potato for a head and a pair of big duck lips attached to the potato with an elastic band.

'Sister Abdula 'X', don't do that!' and he started to waggle his finger at it as he spoke more gibberish.

'Well, I think we've got about as much out of him as we're ever going to,' said Zooz, but Zool and Zoon were already on their way back up the ladder and into the ship.

Later that day they all sat down to discuss what it was the Central Scrutinizer had actually said.

'I've looked up Saint Alfonzo on the computer library and it says that he's the patron saint of calculators. Tundra, as we all know, is an expanse of snow and ice, which could also mean an expanse of

white. I feel there is only one conclusion to be drawn from what the wise man has told us, and that's to go to Silicon Heaven.'

Zool looked at Zooz and said, 'You expect us to go close to the hazardous core of the **Nth Dimension**, to enter a forbidden place on the vague say-so of a freaked out space hippy?'

Zooz looked sheepish and shrugged.

'Sounds OK to me, what are we waiting for?'

* * *

Silicon Heaven, as every one should know, is where all the electronic equipment like consoles, computers, robots and calculators go when they've come to the end of their lives. It is forbidden for anything organic to go into Silicon Heaven except for its mysterious guardian of the gate, the Zombie Woof.

The ***PURE THOUGHT*** headed towards the Nexus point of the **Nth Dimension** where the three parts of the multiverse, the **Nth Dimension**, the Outside, and the Mundane World, were closest together. As they got closer to Silicon Heaven the space around them started to change, becoming lighter and lighter until eventually everything whited out and they no longer had any impression of movement.

The monotony of the scene was becoming unbearable, when the scanners indicated something up ahead.

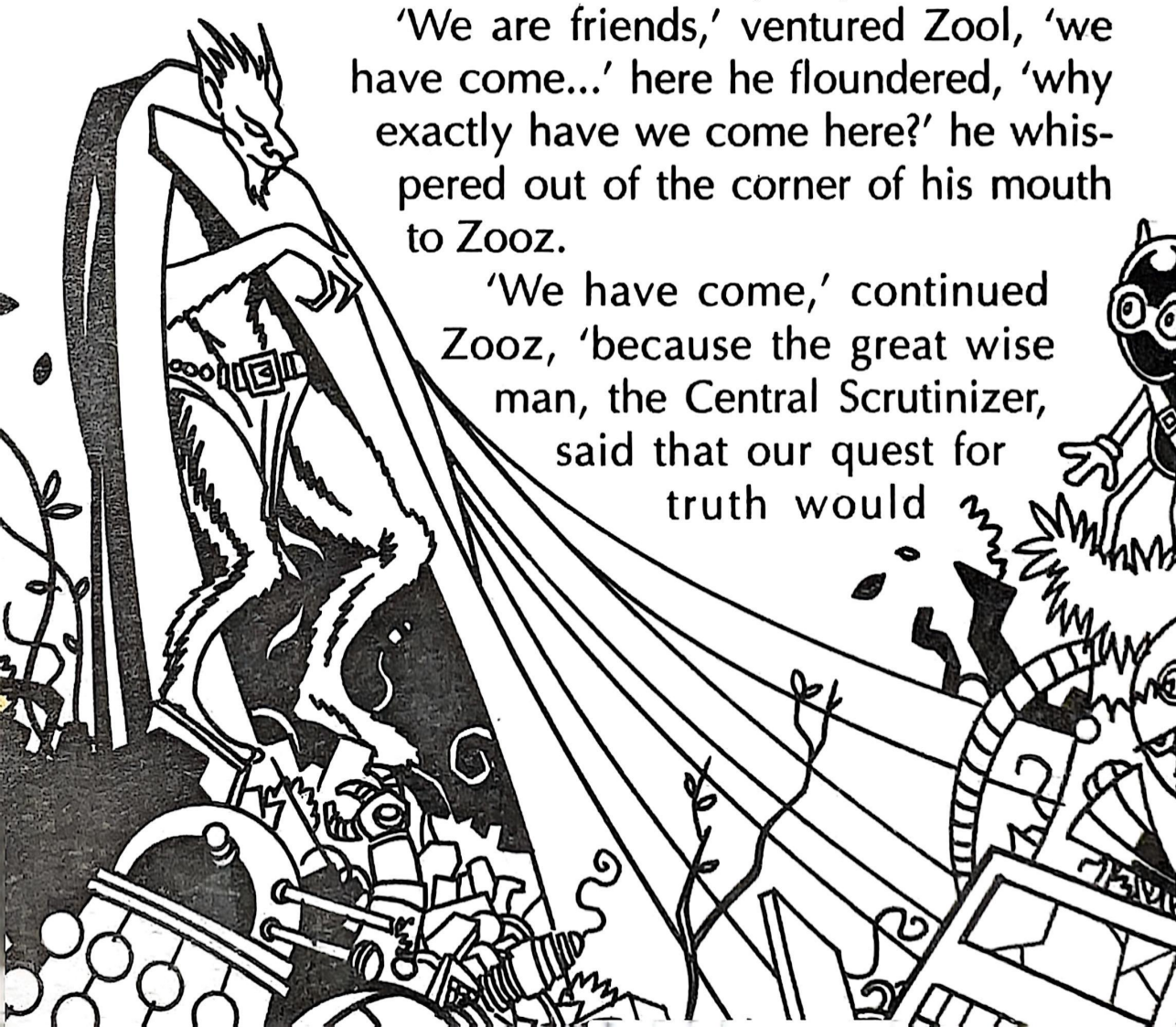
'Put it on the main viewing screen.' ordered Zool and looked straight ahead as the magnified image of a mist-enshrouded pair of silicon chip-shaped gates appeared in front of him.

They parked the ship close to the gates and walked the rest of the way.

'Whooooo are Youuu? Who who, who who?' moaned a voice from behind them. They all turned as one and saw a bizarre creature, even by **Nth Dimension** standards. It was about twice the height of Zool and looked vaguely wolf like, except that it was wearing a smoking jacket and a fez, had one foot bigger than the other that ended in a hoof, and a large fang protruded from its slavering mouth. Its gaze darted back and forth, and it looked terribly suspicious.

'We are friends,' ventured Zool, 'we have come...' here he floundered, 'why exactly have we come here?' he whispered out of the corner of his mouth to Zooz.

'We have come,' continued Zooz, 'because the great wise man, the Central Scrutinizer, said that our quest for truth would



lead us here and...' Even Zooz wasn't exactly sure why they were here.

'We'd like to have a look around,' said Zoon, always preferring the direct approach.

'Whoooooo are youuuuuu?' repeated the Zombie Woof in a voice that resembled the wind on a stormy night.

'I am Zool, cosmic warlock and alien ninja, protector of the **Nth Dimension**. This is the pony-tailed Princess of Imagination, Zooz, and the dog over there is our faithful companion and loyal brother-in-arms, Zoon.'

Understanding burst across the Zombie Woof's face.

'By my zombie toof!' he said, 'you are friends to Plooka's people; we know of you up here. You are friends!' and it advanced on Zool and almost crushed the life out of him with a huge hug.

By the time Zool had finished explaining what had been going on in the **Nth Dimension** lately, the Zombie Woof looked decidedly worried.

'We don't get a lot of news up here you know, not many visitors. If it will help you then you shall be the first organics to enter Silicon Heaven.'

With great ceremony he reached into his robe and pulled out an object that looked like a cross between the inside of a very expensive personal stereo and a ham sandwich. He held it out to Zool and Zool took it, thanking the Zombie Woof as he did so.

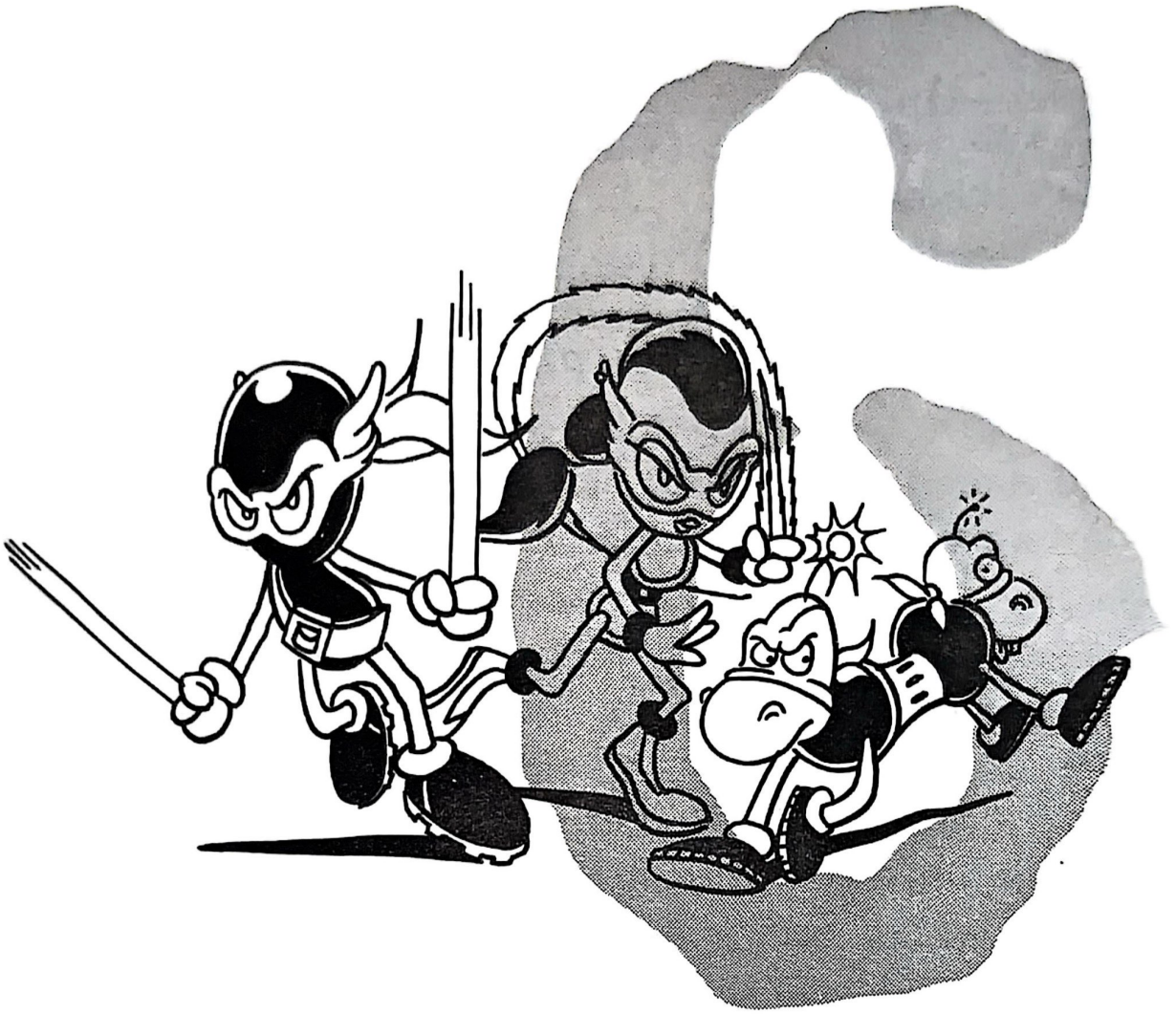
'It is the key to the Gates,' said the Woof proudly.

'I do believe it's a Telefunken U-47!' said Zoon, 'a very rare power converter.'

'Well, try it then,' said Zooz impatiently.

Zool pressed the key to the gates and he felt his energy matrix change as it passed through the Telefunken U-47 and was converted to an energy form that opened the gates. They all looked from one to the other as they hesitated on the threshold of a new experience. The first organic beings ever to enter Silicon Heaven. Hand in hand they crossed over.

What they saw in Silicon Heaven they never spoke about after that day, but they all cherished those memories with them for the rest of their lives.



KROOL FATE

'We didn't find anything,' said Zooz, 'so what now?'

The ***PURE THOUGHT*** was heading out of the whiteness that surrounded Silicon Heaven and back into normal space, if anywhere in the **Nth Dimension** can be considered normal.

'Something will turn up,' said Zool confidently.

'You weren't kidding!' said Zoon, 'I've just picked up a ship on long range scanners. She's trying to sneak away from behind that moon. And

get this, I recognise the engine signature. I think it's Mental Block!'

'You fouled up this time, evildoer! Zooz, arm weapons and raise shields; Zoon, man the scanners, I don't want to loose him. Prepare for pursuit!'

Zool took the controls of the **PURE THOUGHT** and aimed it directly at Mental Block's ship. Mental Block must have registered the **PURE THOUGHT** on one of his scanners because he suddenly changed direction and took off at full speed.

Zool, being just about the best pilot this side of the Dark Nebula, wasted no time in changing his own course and throwing the ship forward at maximum speed. Mental Block might have a large headstart but Zool knew he had a better, faster and prettier ship, and that it was only a matter of time before they caught up with him.

They'd been catching up steadily when Zoon popped his head up from behind the navigation console.

'Er, Zool, we seem to be heading straight for the Nexus.'

Zooz looked up in surprise but all Zool could do was look out of the main viewing port at Mental Block's ship getting ever so slowly bigger with every passing minute. The memory of Mental Block's trap on the planet of the bad vibes, his cruelty to the people of Low Tech and finally his almost causing the death of Zooz burned in his mind.

'The Sea of Fire,' said Zoon, a little more forcefully.

'Zoon, what's our estimated time of contact with Mental Block?' said Zooz.

'Fifteen minutes,' replied Zoon.

'And to the Sea of Fire?'

'Erm, eight minutes thirty seconds.'

She turned to Zool. This was going to be one of the hardest things she'd ever have to do.

'Zool, we're going to have to abandon pursuit.'

'WHAT!?!' shouted Zool, ***'YOU MUST BE JOKING!*** We'll never get a chance like this again.'

'Do I have to spell it out? He is heading straight for the Sea of Fire, where the Dimensions collide. We can't survive in there, nothing can. We won't catch Mental Block for almost fifteen minutes but we'll hit the Sea in less than eight. We have no choice.'

'If he's going in there then we're going in after him. There must be a way. Divert all available energy to deflector shields except for enough energy to launch just two guided Motorhead missiles. We'll ride that storm.'

There was nothing to do now but batten down the hatches, strap themselves in and hope the ship would hold long enough for them to get a couple of missiles off. There could be no talking to Zool when he was like this. He said they were going in, so go in they would. They were a team, they stuck together no matter what. They'd make it through this – they always did.

They hit the edge of the Sea of Fire with a much greater force than any of them had anticipated. The Sea of Fire was like a hurricane caused by the meeting of three separate dimensions, and they were like a toy boat set adrift in it. The eye of the storm was reputed to be the Temple of Oblivion.

'All we have to do is ride the storm for six minutes,' said Zool,'the ship can do that.'

But he was wrong. He had greatly underestimated the power of the force generated when dimensions collide and the ship was breaking up.

Warning lights began to flash on every system and the ship began to groan and shake under the enormous strain. A cooling pipe burst and began to fill the inner cabin with steam, making it impossible to tell what systems were still operational.

'Hold on ship, just a little longer –'

They were almost in range of Mental Block's ship when Zool barked the order to arm.

'I can't,' wailed Zooz, 'the weapons are down and we have no power to the missile release bolts.'

'Zoon, go down and release them manually. As soon as you've done it I'll fire them from up here and guide them in myself.'

It was unbearably hot in the cabin now, with the steam just adding to the discomfort of the already baking hull. Zoon got down to the weapons' bay and fought through the heat and clouds of steam to find the missile beds. Fear and confusion welled up in Zoon's body, threatening to overcome him as,

when he got there, the missile bays were empty. He travelled up the missile rack and every one was bare, the missile apparently having already been released. In the last rack Zooz found something he'd never have thought possible; he found George there with a sonic screw driver in his bill, tampering with the missiles.

'What are you doing?' screamed Zoon, but it was too late. The last missile dropped free and slipped out of the now open hatch, only to be swallowed up by the Sea of Fire.

'I must obey,' said George in an odd voice. He looked at Zoon with blank eyes as he turned the sonic device to face him.

'ABANDON SHIP! ABANDON SHIP!'

came the warning from the computer, but it was too late. The ship was too far gone. With a final groan and the squeal of tortured metal, the main reactors ruptured and the ship exploded.

* * *

Everything was in utter blackness. Zool couldn't see anything; he couldn't feel anything; he couldn't even hear anything, not even his own heatbeat or the sound of his own breathing.

'So this is what it's like to be dead.' thought Zool

'Not dead, just nowhere' came the voice; in it were the regrets and despair of countless beings

who'd wasted their lives in a pointless, meaningless existence; they whispered from the midst of a hopeless void. The voice was inside Zool's head with him and he recognised its feel and taste immediately.

'Krool! What have you done with my friends?'

'Oh, Zool, you are so predictable. That is why it has been so easy to steer you.'

'Explain yourself, evil one!' demanded Zool.

Krool's laugh contained the tears of lost loves and stolen children.

'It is traditional, is it not, to explain my plan to you before your demise. I must admit to a certain satisfaction at you knowing that you are directly responsible for my being able to come in from the outside and take up my rightful place as ruler of the multiverse, though of course there won't be a multiverse for much longer.'

'You can't possibly do it, even you aren't that powerful,' sneered Zool.

'Quite right, I do not possess the power myself, but I do possess the knowledge of how to utilise other powers. I arranged for the kidnap of the Plooka and his technicians in order to build a cosmic condenser. It will crystallise me in the mundane world. Of course such a device, fiendish in its design, needs great power, which is where the spider power crystals become useful. Oh, you were supposed to go to Briny Ablutions, the small duck was not on Low Tech

by accident, he was mesmerised and under my control all along! I knew you would find the way into the island. The episode at the space station hospital was mental block's little distraction. I do hope you enjoyed it.'

As Krool talked, revelling in his imminent victory, Zool fought for his senses. He was ever so slowly becoming aware of his surroundings. The first feeling to return was his sense of touch. He could feel his back resting on top of something very smooth and very cold. As the voice inside his head droned on, he battled to regain control of his body.

'The Plooka was missing a part for the machine, the Telefunken U-47 power converter. Yes, the Central Scrutinizer was receiving subtle direction from me also. Mental Block was there only to lure you to your doom in the Sea of Fire. I teleported you and your companions out of the ship before it broke up because, you see, the most important part of the machine was the most difficult to obtain, being so rare and hard to catch. you see, zool old friend, I need to tap directly into the cosmic pool of Imagination Magic. I need a way to power up the crystals though the Telefunken U-47.'

Zool had by now got back all the feeling in his body and could hear the sound of breathing close by. He recognised it came from Zooz and Zoon and he could just make out another sound that was like a sea of acid washing against a beach of glass.

'You don't get it, do you?' Krool's voice was filled with malice. The sudden change made Zool mentally start. He was beginning to understand his fate.

'You are the key to my entry into the Nth Dimension and the Mundane World. You have come to me of your own free will and now you will give up your life as the imagination power of the Multiverse bursts through your body and destroys you utterly!' Krool had worked himself up in to a frenzy of vengeful excitement and was laughing with the pure exhilaration of the moment.

The sound of the sea began to get louder, drowning Krool out, the gentle lapping making Zool feel relaxed and causing him to remember the few quiet times in his life when he and Zooz had grabbed a moment alone together, just to enjoy each others' company. He thought of how much she and Zoon meant to him, and imagined them all on the beach together, playing ball games and eating a picnic.

There was something hiding behind him and in the corners of his mind. Every time he tried to look round it would be behind him again. He felt the flow of imagination begin to course through and out of his body, disappearing into the void that was all around him.

Zool knew he had to fight, but the feeling of being with Zooz and Zoon was just too strong. A tiny part of his mind that he still had control over began to fight

back. He opened his eyes. He was in the middle of an infinite room of empty space, lying on a slab of cold black stone. On his left, Zooz, Zoon and George were in stasis, on his right the Chrome Pig and all his technicians were frozen in a similar state while above him a web of now brightly glowing power crystals hung, suspended in the machine the Plooka had built, its unrecognisable pieces of machinery humming and sparking with a life of its own. Zool was being used as a funnel for the Imagination to flow through. The Telefunken U-47 was converting the energy into a form the power crystals could use, and Krool was building enough power up to break open the gate into the other worlds – and there was nothing Zool could do. Fight as he might, he just couldn't stem the flow of imagination.

'You are what you is...' suddenly popped into his mind. Zooz was sending him a mental massage.

What does it mean, what does it mean? thought Zool. The power crystals were looking very full; any second now Krool would release the energy, break open the gate and enter the Mundane world.

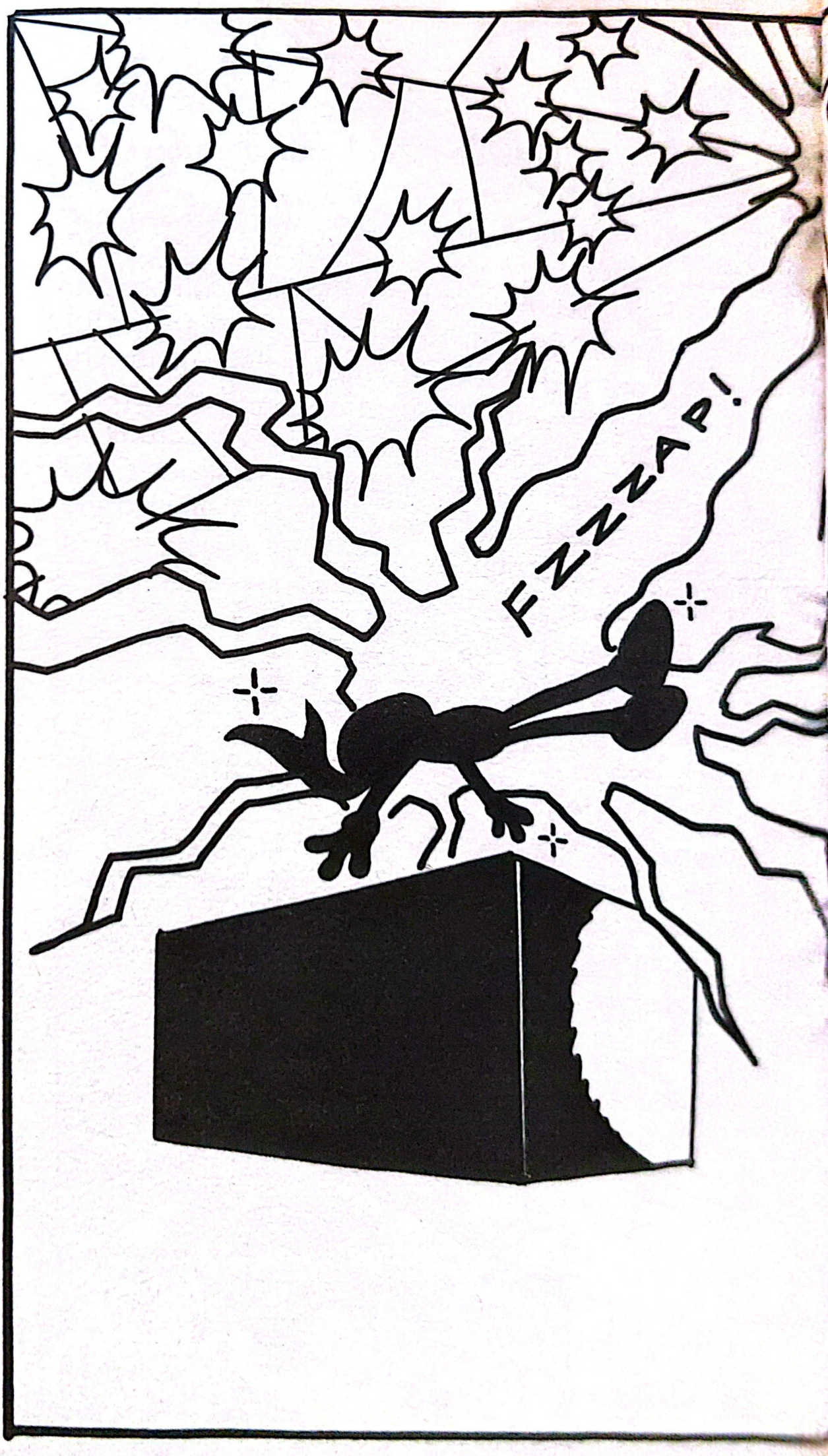
It's at times of extreme stress when inspiration often strikes. Zool finally understood what the Central Scrutinizer meant by, 'You are what you is'. Zool, Zooz and Zoon didn't just serve Imagination, they *were* imagination, born out of the need to party that every sentient life form anywhere in the universe has. He didn't have the power; he *was* the power and Krool didn't have a clue as to the real

relationship between Zool and the powers of Imagination.

'OK,' reasoned Zool, 'If you want power, taste ***REAL*** power.'

As Krool peered into the Temple of Oblivion and looked upon Zool on the Altar of Drear Reality through the veil that kept him on the outside, he saw Zool glow with the light of a million suns as the energy of pure imagination exploded from his very essence. He watched in ineffectual terror as the power crystals filled, overflowed and discharged their potent cargo right in his face, and he screamed with frustration as the stored energy in the crystals shot though him in an uncontrollable explosion that blew Krool away to ride on the nine cosmic winds.

* * *


FZZZAP!

Zool's power blades lay on the floor next to the Altar, while on the Altar itself, Zool's outline had been indelibly burned; other than that, there was no sign.

'He might not have been destroyed,' said the Plooka.

Zooz looked up from where she'd been weeping on the Altar.

'Krool had forced me into making for him a machine to crystallise him into being. I fear that the force of the explosion here might have forced Zool out of the **Nth Dimension**.'

Zool dead in a final showdown with Krool was bad enough, but to be told that he might not even exist in his own dimension – what else could she do but mourn for her lost friend.

'Will we ever see him again?' asked Zoon.

'If Zool is in the

MUNDANE WORLD,

as I suspect he is, then he will have to figure a way to get back by himself. We will watch from here and aid him in any way we can. I have constructed a craft to get us back to my home; once there I will build you a new ship, the likes of which have never been seen in the Multiverse. You will find a doorway and bring him home.'

* * *

Zool woke up by degrees. He did a quick inventory of body parts. Two arms, two legs, two heads... whoa, hang on... miscount, one head; everything checked out and nothing appeared to be broken. His senses started creeping back one at a time, as if they didn't want to startle him with the news of where he actually was. He was as weak as a newborn kitten, hardly able to lift even his head. He could smell something unpleasant, like the smell of a burnt-out cannon or the exhaust ports of a Turbo laser. He reached out tentatively with his fingers and felt soft damp grass. As he opened his eyes and looked up he could see unfamiliar stars in an unfamiliar twilight sky. He rested for a long time, until it was deepest dark, until he was roused from his sleep by the roar of machines passing close by.

He staggered to his feet and, steadying himself on a nearby blue box nailed to a metal fence, looked around. He appeared to be on a large straight road which was filled with a constant stream of heavy traffic, only all the traffic looked pretty much alike. They almost all had four wheels, were box shaped and had uniform colours. *Boring*! thought Zool.

He started to walk up the highway in the direction traffic was going. There was a sign in front of him and he had to concentrate really hard to stop it from jumping about as he swayed to and fro.

'BIRMINGHAM - 53 MILES' read the sign.

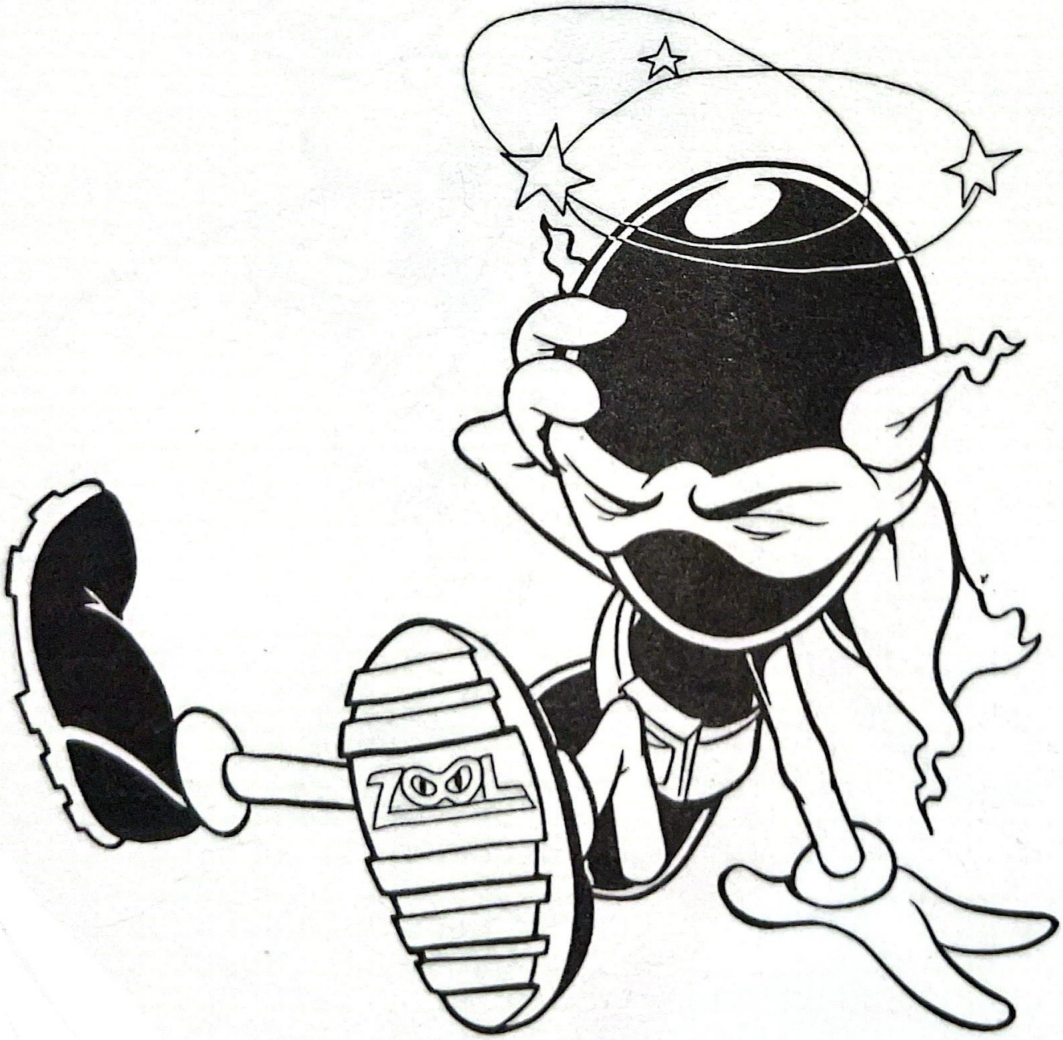
'I wonder where Birmingham is,' wondered Zool. 'For that matter, I wonder what a mile is...'

* * *

the

END

or is it?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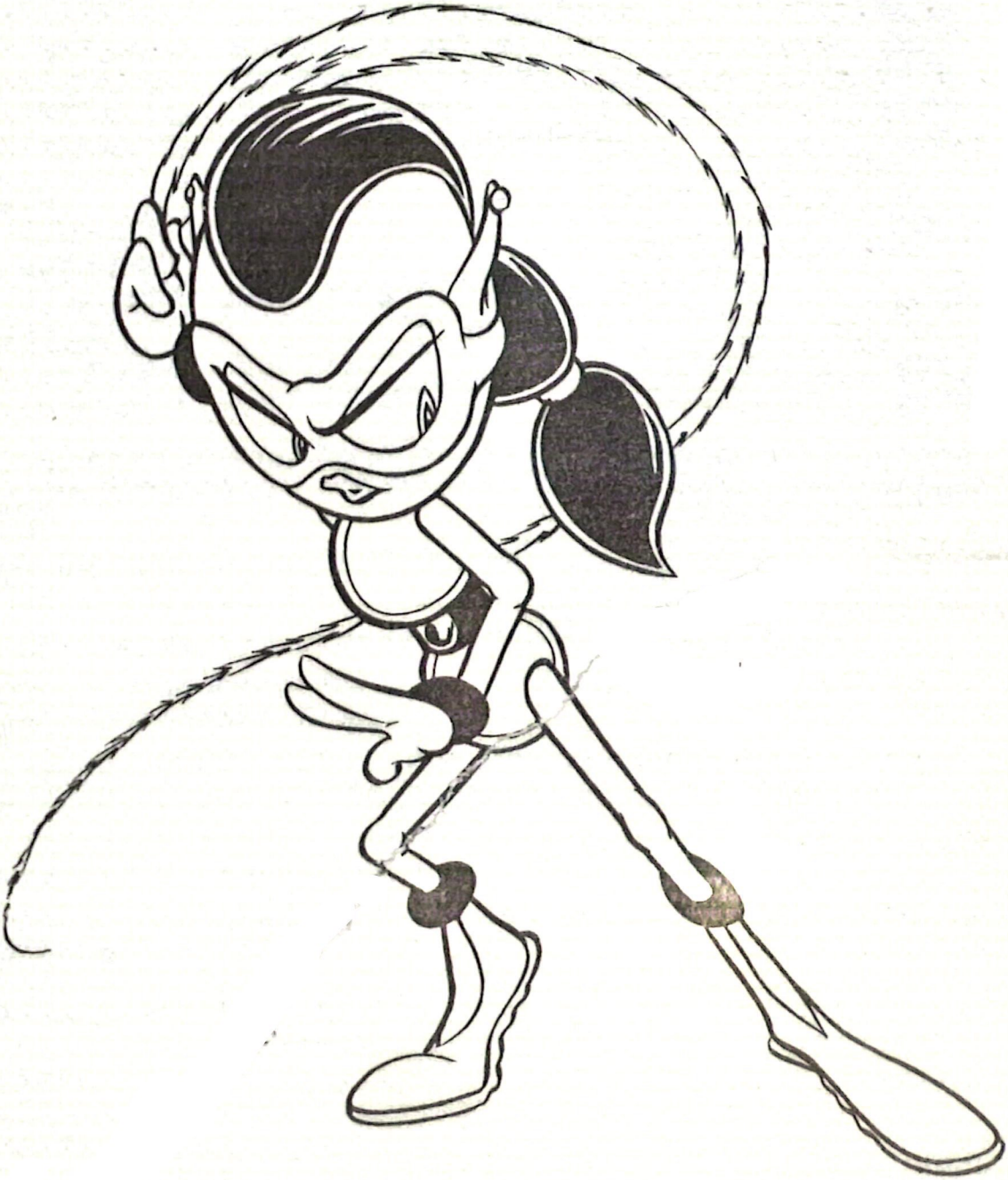

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